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Moving from individual to constructive accountability

Seiling, J.G.

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JANE GALLOWY SEILING

*Moving from Individual to
Constructive Accountability*

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Moving from Individual to Constructive Accountability

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ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit van Tilburg, op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. F.A. van der Duyn Schouten, in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een door het college van promoties aangewezen commissie, in de aula van de Universiteit op vrijdag 23 september 2005 om 10.45 uur

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JANE GALLOWY SEILING

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Promotores: Prof. Dr. K. Gergen
Prof. Dr. J.B. Rijsman

Submitted by:

Jane Galloway Seiling MOD
Lima, Ohio, USA
419-227-7979
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Summary

A qualitative study with standardized questions (yet flexible) was undertaken to identify (1) what accountability currently looks like in organizations today, (2) introduce the concept of *constructive accountability* (CA) into the thinking of top organizational members, (3) identify the interviewees' sense of the concepts usefulness in the organizational context, and (4) request the interviewees input on how CA could be introduced into today's organizations. The process included face-to-face and telephone conversations with twelve currently in a managerial role and two former managerial members of twelve organizations. The outcome suggested that, although some organizations are actively and purposely accepting the concepts of participation and collaboration (and many are not), accountability remains in a traditional mode. According to the interviewees, accountability is most often experienced as demeaning, punitive and "something they do not want to do." Accountability has not moved into the paradigm of member involvement and the movement of decisioning lower in organizations. CA was acknowledged as "a new way to look at accountability," useful, and preferred—yet how to get to being a CA organization was a dilemma for these executives. One organization offered a model for moving toward CA in organizations.

SAMENVATTING

Aan de hand van gestandaardiseerde (maar toch flexibele) vragen werd in deze kwalitatieve studie (1) nagegaan hoe *accountability* er thans uitziet in organisaties (2) werd het begrip van *constructive accountability* (CA) geïntroduceerd (3) werd nagegaan hoe nuttig de geïnterviewden dit concept vonden in de context van organisaties, en (4) werd gevraagd in hoeverre zij zouden kunnen bijdragen aan het invoeren van CA in hedendaagse organisaties. De resultaten gaven de indruk dat, alhoewel enkele organisaties (maar vele ook niet) het idee van participatie en collaboratie actief en doelbewust accepteerden, *accountability* toch bleef bij wat het was. *Accountability* is kennelijk nog niet zover dat het aansluit bij het paradigma van betrokkenheid van de leden en besluitvorming laag in de organisatie. CA werd wel herkend en erkend als zijnde "een nieuwe visie op *accountability*", nuttig, en te prefereren, maar de echte stap naar een daadwerkelijke CA-organisatie was een dilemma voor deze bestuurders. Een enkele organisatie bood ons wel een model voor hoe een organisatie zich kan bewegen in de richting van CA.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Morally, it simply is not open to us to do what we want when we please.
John Shotter, 1984

This dissertation introduces a relational approach to accountability in organizations. This approach, called *constructive accountability* (CA), broadens and builds the strengths of an organization and its members moving accountability into everyday work instead of delaying and calling to account after the fault. Although there is no shortage of interest in accountability, academic literature has not been responsive to that interest (Frink and Ferris, 1998, p. 1). This is an attempt to “remove the blinders” of traditional accountability while remaining sensitive to the effects of language on our practices of accountability.

Brooks (1995) provides the following definition of traditional accountability within Western organizations: “*Accountability is a mechanism to ensure that individuals can be called to account for their actions, and that sanctions are incurred if the account is unsatisfactory*” (p. 12, italics in text). Brooks emphasizes the following words in his definition: *mechanism* as a procedural activity; *individuals* because the activity focuses on individuals while also noting the collective aspect of the term as reasonable and essential; *sanctions* being seen as essential to performance. *Unsatisfactory*, as an element of accountability, brings in the personal element of

holding offenders to account. He believes that “*the purpose of sanctions is not to act as a threat to you but as a guarantee to me*” (p.13, emphasis in text). Brooks also notes that since values evolve over time, there is a vagueness and constant flux and impreciseness within the mechanism of accountability in organizations. This flux makes it difficult to say precisely what an unsatisfactory account is, other than within the understanding of the person holding someone to account (p. 14).

An account, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is a verbal or written description of a particular transaction or event; a narrative; an explanatory statement of conduct, as to a superior; a statement of reasons, causes, etc., explaining an event; a reason, basis, consideration. This puts accountability into a coercive mode practiced after-the-fault. As noted by Shotter (1984),

Our ways of accounting for things have a coercive quality to them; only if we make sense of things in certain approved ways can we be accounted by others in our society as competent, responsible members of it (p. xi).

According to Scott and Lyman (1968), “An account is a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valutive inquiry” (p. 46). They point out that, “An account is not called for when people engage in routine, common-sense behavior in a cultural environment that recognizes that behavior as such” (pp. 46-47). Although a “valutive inquiry” is not necessarily negative, the inference that it only occurs after non-routine or non-commonsense behavior suggests a punitive posture. Thus, this statement also sees constructive disobedience or deviation from the norm as a separating behavior that is not acceptable in the cultural environment of the organization.

Scott and Lyman (1968), as does the quoted dictionary account, clearly place accountability as an evaluative process *after* something has gone wrong. It is the functionality of

this definition in the workplace that I am challenging in this writing. I believe that the traditional penalties of accountability create an implicit and/or explicit constraint on virtually everything that is done in the workplace.

Lawrence and Maitlis (2005), after researching the writings, of Garfinkel (1967), Fairclough (1992), Mills (1940), Antaki (1994), and others, agree with Woodilla (1988) that “accounts are constructed through practices of talking and writing” (p. 11). In their study of accounts as a segment of sensemaking, they state, “Perhaps the most defining characteristic of accounts is that they provide an explanation of an event that has disrupted the flow of everyday life” (p. 14).

Goffman’s (1974) work on accounts focuses on the frames of accounts. Frames, according to Goffman, can be understood as a particular form of accounts—an account of the context in which some action occurs, which provides the foundation for making an action sensible and meaningful (noted in Lawrence & Maitlis, 2005, p. 8). This suggests that an account (frame) can be a motivation/justification for action, making it part of how people make sense of everyday life.

Unfortunately, as noted by Aram (1990) regarding the American perspective of accountability and individual performance, accountability is individualized; cooperation and collaboration have not been essential to achievement. Thus, accountability has been localized in the individual.

Historically, cooperation [and collaboration have] played only a supporting role in the value structure of American society. Individual struggles against nature and the life-threatening frontier (fight or flight) are dominant American images. Human relationships are primarily utilitarian. People join together for instrumental reasons, such as their common defense. An unwritten motto in the United States is ‘live and let live’ (Aram, 1990, p. 175).

After-the-fault or end accountability, as currently practiced, includes account-demanding, account-giving and account-selection activities. *Account-demanding* is the act of a person in authority calling someone to account to explain something that has been said or done. The person being called to account participates by *account-giving*, the giving of excuses and justifications to a superior in response to the account demand—if an opportunity to do so occurs. After account-giving, *account-selection* by the person in authority includes acknowledgement/acceptance/non-acceptance of the given account. (Unfortunately, the person demanding the account may already have assumed a stance that is not adjustable, making it unlikely that authentic account-selection will occur.) The account authority (demonder) selects what will be initiated as punishment for the accountable act or behavior. Because these accountings are usually held when it is too late for adjustment or redemption of the alleged misdemeanor, the event may be experienced as a “beating of the soul,” as even unfair, cruel and abusive. If not directly abusive, the accounting may include a judgmental “gaze”—a look that suggests a lack of feeling and presence on the part of the demonder. Relationships, if they existed in the first place, dissolve through the receiver’s assumption of what “the gaze” means. Levels of mistrust become part of a continuing, unspoken phenomenon in future exchanges.

Within daily work practices there is a tolerance for some degree of ineffectiveness. When there is finally a failure, however, the demonder sets in motion after-the-fault accountability “without,” according to Aram, “anyone being particularly caring” (1990, p. 175). Within this scenario, tolerance of ineffectiveness allows misunderstandings to go unexplained and little mistakes to go unaddressed until the resulting big mistake occurs. Then there are assumptions that specific “bodies of reason” (Gergen, 1991, p. 12) exist that justify the traditional process of calling people on the carpet. This call to account is an effort to punish for

doing something seen as “wrong.” At that moment the person(s) experiencing the demand for an account is seen as “out”—instead of being “us,” he or she is a “them.”

Unfortunately, calling someone to account in Western culture is all too often done in demeaning ways, both publicly and privately. Public, abusive accountability is particularly damaging because of the significance of the humiliation and exploitation experienced by the target. Credibility, relationships, availability of resources and, as noted above, levels of trust diminish. Even when calling to account is not meant to be demeaning, the results are often so because of the sense of it being unsafe to give information to the person in authority. This may occur even though the information might clarify, justify, excuse or explain a misunderstanding. “I’m being punished; this is unfair” is a likely internal response. The current prominent leadership orientation, I believe, maintains traditional accountability as appropriate. This leadership orientation includes:

- Treating the workers as children
- Limiting opportunities to perform and be involved in organizational outcomes and performance
- Putting specific frames with rigid boundaries around roles and responsibilities.
- Seeing accountability as a method of control, reward and punishment
- Planting and nourishing the seeds of conflict and divisiveness
- Using the “preferred few” to get things done
- Seeing employee choices as necessarily orchestrated by those in authority
- Limiting the opportunity for others to choose responsibility
- Seeing activities going beyond the leader’s desire for “order” as disobedience and malpractice.

As a result of these leadership outlooks and practices, it is routine for organizational members to point the finger of blame elsewhere. Scott (2002) defines this as *the accountability shuffle*,

activities attempting to push accountability upward, downward or sidewise (p. 3). The shuffler has “given them what they want,” that is, aligned his or her actions around what is perceived as acceptable, but things went wrong anyway. Thus, in his or her mind, blame must be shuffled to someone else in order to remain credible. Often, the shuffler spends time recruiting others into a mass of employees who blame and shame “those others.” Shuffling is also an attempt to maintain the status quo in terms of what is expected and safe. Scott’s accountability shuffle may also occur when there are strong peer group standards that allow little forgiveness when doing things differently. Giving the excuse of “they made me do it” is a shuffle of accountability to avoid chastisement from peers—and to cull sympathy for being forced by “those above” to step out of line.

As noted, under this long accepted scenario, accountability occurs after the fault and is based in the assumption of *one-person being fully responsible and accountable* for particular actions and/or outcomes. Much effort is expended in locating this one person. If a group is identified as responsible for the fault, the group turns inward to locate the *one* at fault. Some *one person* must pay. In writing about “the logical and appreciative dimensions of accountability,” Cummings and Anton (1999) defined accountability as “a calling to give accounts (excuses or justifications) to another (or others) for deviation between the event for which *one is responsible* and organizational expectations or norms” (p. 258, emphasis added). Even in discussing the appreciative dimensions of accountability, the focus remains on one person causing the problem.

The Collective Person

Holding one person to account suggests that *this one person is fully responsible for the action*. Yet activities in organizations are outcomes of past and present scenarios of collective practice. No one person is fully responsible for anything. One’s perceptions knowledge,

resources and actions are the result of collectivities of influence, thought, communications, performances with and observations of others. It is the *collective person*, relating with other collective persons, who takes action.

My focus is on the person as a collective being. I suggest that relationships are the forming point for the person. Persons are mutually and uniquely co-constructed.

The collective person (and the collective organization) is formed metaphorically like the Mississippi River: the water rushing to the Gulf of Mexico includes droplets that formed at its origin and in streams and tributaries along the way. The power of the river comes from sources such as the Ohio River and many other large and small rivers and tributaries passing through many states and many other small and large passages from fields and streams along the way. Each droplet merges with many others. It would be hard to identify where any drop of water originated...it just came along dissolving into a collective river as the water flowed toward the Gulf. Each person, like the Mississippi River, is altered with each contact, experience, learning, desire and action. This collective person is a unique person made up of the influences of other unique persons. The collective person is created through ongoing relationships; thus “personal” reflection and contemplation is influenced by multiples of others. Gergen (1991) suggests,

As the self as a serious reality is laid to rest and the self is constructed and reconstructed in multiple contexts, one enters finally the stage of the *relational self*. One's sense of individual autonomy gives way to a reality of immersed interdependence, in which it is relationship that constructs the self (p. 147).

This is not to suggest that the collective person does not make decisions and choices that bring occurrences about—sometimes positively, sometimes catastrophically. Yet, as McNamee and Gergen (1999) state, “One cannot constitute meaning alone nor engage in a rational choice among competing goods without having absorbed the intelligibilities of a community” (p. 8).

It is in the conscious “heedfulness” (Langer, 1997) of others that we can envision the mutuality or interdependence of *relational responsibility* (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). People together design actions through relational processes of conversation. Although appearing to act singularly, diverse thoughts and actions are coordinated in ways that produce outcomes that cannot possibly be created or claimed alone.

Even the traditional practice of individual accountability is co-constructed. It is in Shotter’s (1984, p. x) “joint action” that the emerging flow of interaction produces accountability. “Joint action produces the conversational resources that enable people to account for their actions,” states Lannamann (1999, p. 87-88). As noted by Johann Roux, PhD, a professor, therapist, and consultant from Vanderbijlpark, South Africa,

Millions and millions of relational interactions create the same amount of possible interpretations. Then in turn, those interpretations drive people’s actions in relationship and in the co-creation of accountability inside their relational interactions” (personal communication).

Toward Constructive Accountability

The weaknesses of traditional accountability and the recognition of the collective person suggest that a new form of accountability must be brought forward into everyday work. In the present thesis I will attempt to re-form and reframe accountability as a relational, ongoing exchange among persons. Specifically, I propose a model of constructive accountability (CA), which I define as *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace*. Constructive accountability is an ongoing mutually beneficial process of sensemaking that leads to an increased willingness of participants to be collaborative and responsible. As I see it, constructive accountability exists in a context of shared and co-

constructed thought, knowledge and action; mutually constructed synergies; open communication; and multiple connections and partnerships. It includes recognition of the importance of working well together over time.

Such thinking asks us to reassess virtually everything we have been taught about how we live, work and are accountable together. With the reassessment and re-valuation of accountability, new and exciting forms of action and interaction may be located. Most people see accountability as a picture of what happens if things go wrong or when he or she does not “behave right.” This picture includes the possibility of punishment, embarrassment and degradation and suggests the need for personal control. Such a picture degrades the possibility of meaningful relationships, contribution and support during the process of work. One “knows” that if things do not go perfectly, as anticipated or planned, he or she is alone and can be held negatively accountable. In contrast, constructive accountability emphasizes the *strengths* (skills, talents, knowledge, intentions, positive aspirations, collaborative tendencies, etc.) of organizational members and encourages members to seek and offer support, resources and cooperation. It is to participate at a higher level of involvement and learning, locating accountability in ongoing communal action. If something goes wrong, others step up to assist in locating what has gone wrong and to identify an alternative, without placing blame.

As noted by Boyatzis, Stubbs and Taylor (2002), “Beyond knowledge and competencies, the additional ingredient necessary to outstanding performance appears to be the desire to use one’s talent” (p. 150). In the new form of accountability, “the desire to use one’s talent” expands when others are working beside you and punitive accountability is less likely. Knowledge, competency and the willingness to use personal strengths in the organizational context are positively driven. At the same time, the strengths of organizational members are enhanced

through the ongoing practice of constructive accountability. Recursively, it also builds the strengths of other members and the organization served. The development and integration of strengths and skills in the ongoing practice of constructive accountability positively adjusts attitudes, expanding opportunities to communicate in meaningful ways.

Accountability that is constructive is based inside the activity of accomplishing assigned and non-assigned activities. It is the process of using the collective person's and the group's strengths in relationship to accomplish the expected and deal with the unexpected. In my view, accountability will stay within the architecture of traditional accountability practices (after-the-fault accountability) unless relational, collaborative action occurs; working together is the impetus to accomplishment. Unfortunately, the discovery of a strengthening hypothesis requires turning away from what is currently assumed as a rational organizational context of accountability. Turning to a new form of accountability that is moved inside the work will be difficult for many.

Accountability that is experienced as constructive supports the development of peer group collaboration. Collaboration provides peer groups with various forms of assistance, including information, encouragement and a sense of safety. Yet, constructive accountability (CA) is more than collaboration. CA, as it spreads across the culture of an organization, blurs lines of status and title. It brings people together into the work, creating a mutuality of accountability for the work. It allows, even encourages, one to pull others into his or her work and then, ultimately, to join them in their work. Sensemaking becomes easier, and a pride in participation expands.

In her *broaden and build theory* of positive emotions, Barbara L. Frederickson (2002, Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003.) suggests, "Positive emotions appear to *broaden*

people's momentary thought-action repertoires and *build* their enduring personal resources" (2002, p. 122, emphasis in text). Assuming that CA exchanges are experienced as positive, the broaden and build theory of positive emotion would, although notably focused on the individual, be an appropriate model for reframing accountability as beneficial and constructive. Fredrickson (2002) also notes, "[T]hese broadened mindsets carry indirect and long-term adaptive benefits because broadening *builds* enduring personal resources" (p. 123, emphasis in text). Seo, Barrett and Bartunek (2004) quote Frederickson (2001) as saying that "thought-action repertoires include approaching, exploring, learning, creating and playing, whereas negative feelings narrow them by urging people to act in defensive ways (e.g., escape, attack, or expel)" (p. 25). These thought-action repertoires are synonymous with the positive, strengthening activities of constructive accountability. Strengths *flow naturally* in a CA environment. Strengths are broadened and built through the ongoing positive performative practices of CA. These practices create a sense that one has provided valued contributions. As noted by Bandler and Grindler (1982), "It's *positive* to be *useful*" (p. 30).

Clifton and Nelson (1992) state, "A strength is an inner ability" (p. 56). They add, "Practice [of these strengths] is the classic activity of successful people" (p. 64). In these statements, Clifton and Nelson focus on the individual. Yet strengths cannot be broadened and built alone. "Inner strength" and knowledge strength is co-created *within relationships*. Unless a thought or action is recognized as positive and useful in the eyes of others, it will not be interpreted as an "inner strength." Development of relationships with others expands the willingness of members to continue to be in a learning stance, to be involved in meaningful training and education, to build their own personal resources and to continually nurture positive relationships.

History and Writings About Accountability

In looking at the historical emergence of accountability practices, Dubnick's (1998) writings discuss the origin of the term and the assumptions regarding accountability that currently support its practice. He states, "We take the need for accountability for granted and assume that everyone understands what the concept means and why it is so important" (p. 68). As Dubnick (1998) argues, "Accountability is an anglican concept" (p. 69). It is particular to English speaking countries, and, too, it is quite distinctive. In most of the romance languages (French, Spanish and Italian, as well as Portuguese), various forms of the term 'responsibility' are used in lieu of the English 'accountability'" (1998, p. 69). In Russia the term is distinct having roots in the term "report" (p. 70). In non-English countries that have adopted the anglican version of accountability, the adoption has occurred out of forced necessity (e.g., Japan), or because of past Anglican governance (e.g., Israel) (p. 70).

According to Dubnick (1998), tracing the history of the term back in English history, "accountability" existed as far back as the 14th century, potentially tied to a French origin (although it was not a French language term). It gained specific importance twenty years after the Norman Conquest with the publication of the Domesday Books in 1086. William I ordered a full survey of his domain in order to collect taxes. A survey, or call to account, was a new and innovative way to make sure collection was achieved from those who owed the Crown money (Douglas, 1964, pp. 355-356, quoted in Dubnick, 1998, p. 70).

Moving to the Civil War in America, according to Rodgers (1978, noted by Diddams, 2003, p. 509), "Most people were self-employed or worked in shops of fewer than five employees." Based on individual achievement, working for wages was considered a temporary and somewhat objectionable condition. The goal was to earn wages until one could, in the case

of women, get married, or for men, earn enough money to start their own business. Between 1870 and 1900, 25 million people came to America and a permanent wage class was created. This fueled a 150 percent growth and eliminated the personal connection to organizational success. The Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) was alive and well during all these changes even though a sense of alienation between one's work and the outcome had become evident with the advent of technology, repetitive work and boredom. The PWE is reflected in the American culture that emphasizes the capacity and responsibility of the individual to act independently and effectively.

It is, in my thinking, in the pre- and post-WWII era that accountability, as we know it today, became more pronounced. The disconnection experienced by employees standing in long lines at machines increased "the need" in the minds of management to call people to account and set things straight. Individual success had become more remote and dependence on "those who know" in the role of administrator and manager, a now impersonal role, emphasized a command and control orientation.

Soon Heider (1958) did his research on explanations, later becoming a reference point for the above referenced work of Scott and Lyman (1968). Heider's work, to become known as *attribution theory*, emphasized "personal causation" as being "of great importance" placing attribution in the context of the individual. Heider (1958) identified ten prototypes that build a person's account of the social world (note the words in parentheses). He said,

People have an awareness of their surroundings and the events within it (the *life space*), they attain this awareness through *perception*) and other processes, they are *affected* by their personal and impersonal environment, they *cause* changes in the environment, they are able to (*can*) and *try* to cause these changes, they have wishes (*want*) and *sentiments*, they stand in unit relations to other entities (*belonging*) and they are accountable according to certain standards (*ought*) (p. 17, noted in Antaki, 1994, p. 10, emphasis in text).

Philip Tetlock (1985, 1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1995, 1998, 1999) is prominent in the few academy writings about accountability. His writings on accountability theory discuss the anticipation of responses to accountability. He suggests that accountability puts people in the role of the “intuitive politician”—seeking means to maximize status and self-image, to avoid negative judgments and to manage their responses. Accountability is a feature of judgment and choice, linking employees to the organization by reminding them that they need to (a) act according to the prevailing norms and (b) give accounts when they deviate from those norms. How accountability occurs in organizations influences decisions and behavior (Tetlock, 1992a). Because of this, members attempt to align their thoughts, attitudes and values in accordance with their organization.

In this thinking, each organizational member seeks positive evaluation by those in authority and their peers, even if it is felt there is a possibility of being wrong. An early research effort focusing on strategies for coping with accountability by Tetlock, Skitka and Boettger (1989) resulted in the emergence of “a robust, replicable, and theoretically interpretable pattern” of accountability (p. 640). It revealed that, “Interpersonal goals and concerns play a key role in shaping the underlying cognitive structure of expressed political attitudes” (p. 640).

Their findings suggest that one’s activities are consciously and unconsciously focused on potential outcomes/consequences of his or her actions “as they relate to interpersonal goals and concerns.” There is special attention directed to avoiding negative judgments and/or impressions that would impact one’s social standing in the group. There is a focus on appropriate responses and activities, which adds to the stress of day-to-day activities. One must “stay in the loop” as much as possible in order to know (or guess) what the right or approved way to do things might

be (p. 640). Tetlock's (1999) intuitive politician considers the relative justifiability of a response and the options based on acceptance of the outcomes that might follow (p. 119). Thus, the central function of judgment and choice in the scenario of traditional accountability is neither to make causal sense of the world, nor to maximize profit, but to protect one's social identity in the eyes of others important to the person.

As with Dubnick (1998, p. 68), noted earlier, Koestenbaum and Block (2001) suggest, "We... have a small way of thinking about accountability." They add, "We think that people want to escape from being accountable. We believe that accountability is something that must be imposed. We have to hold people accountable, and we devise reward and punishment schemes to do this (p. 3)." Their focus for the book is located in the title: *Freedom and Accountability at Work*. They say, "[A] key task of management would be to confront subordinates with their freedom" (p. 7). Essentially, they say, "In the end, our freedom and our experience of accountability may be all we have to hold on to" (p. 10). Koestenbaum and Block believe that employees have been defined as the problem and management as the solution. They add, "Our model of leadership is constructed in [an] engineering, cause-and-effect vein," defining management as the cause of the workplace and employees as the effect. It is an instrumental transaction. This is unintentionally creating a breeding ground for entitlement (p. 4).

The anxiety that results from attempting to escape (negative) accountability forces people to look for certainty. There is an attempt to follow specific ways of doing things in order to transfer blame to "the system" or others (inducing Scott's [2002] accountability shuffle) who designed how things should be done faultlessly. Koestenbaum and Block see anxiety, real or imagined, as creating a limiting organizational culture. Here one can see shared elements with

Tetlock's (1992a) theory of political intuition and its emphasis on members' attempts to align their thoughts and actions in accordance with their organization.

Cumming and Anton (1999) recognize the corrosive potential of the mechanistic orientation and offer suggestions for inviting new case scenarios, yet they propose that effective accountability systems that include:

1. Clarity of the expectations,
2. A person to whom one is accountable,
3. Circumstances of the accountability,
4. Credibility of the act,
5. Proximity (whether it may occur today or the end of the year),
6. Significance of the reward or punishment involved for doing what is accountable
7. Expectancy of being rewarded or punished (pp. 274-280).

To propose that expectations, circumstances and who whom one is accountable can be specifically clear and understandable (#1 above) suggesting a limiting scenario of performance, stifling innovation and creativity outside of one's own area of accountability. Ericson (1995) also limits accounts to one's own area of responsibility, agreeing with Cummings and Anton (1999), stating,

Accountability entails an obligation to give an account of activities within one's ambit of responsibility... Accountable also means capable of being accounted for or subject to explanation. Such capability entails a narrative or record of events and an explanation of events—legitimate causes, justifications, excuses, blame, and remedies—that demonstrate one has acted in a credible manner (p. 136).

Hiebert and Klatt (2000) have a person-focused view of what accountability "is" in organizations of today. They offer "six principles [that] provide a foundation for accountability within organizations:"

- (1) Accountability is a statement of personal promise.
- (2) To be accountable means you are answerable for results, not just activities.
- (3) To be accountable for results, you must have the opportunity for judgment and decision-making.
- (4) Your accountability is yours alone, without qualification. It is neither shared nor conditional.
- (5) Accountability is meaningless without significant consequences.
- (6) Finally, and very importantly, every member of the organization is accountable for the organization as a whole (p. 200).

These six principles are the hallmarks of control in the mechanistic era. As noted by the date of the publication, year 2000, these principles are still alive, well and promoted in organizational practices today. There is a full focus on individual performance and significant consequences without acknowledgement of the mutuality of performance. The influence, efforts and effectiveness added by others largely go unrecognized and ignored. The above principles also contribute to competition for resources: “If I don’t get them someone else will and I’ll be lost” and “With no benefit for supporting and contributing to the efforts of others, why bother?”

Although Heibert and Klatt’s final principle stresses that all members are accountable for the organization as a whole, information flow and openness within this scenario may be hampered. Focusing on the one-person-being-accountable establishes “turf,” potentially eliminating the willingness of others to participate to the benefit of all—including the organization.

Culbert and Ullmen (2001) state, “The core problem is One-Sided Accountability”—as applied in *hierarchical relationships*” (p. 34, italics in text). They see one-sided accountability as the defining attribute of a hierarchical relationship and the crux of disorientation and truth withholding (p. 6). Traditionally, the *hierarchical structure* is viewed as the mechanism for

achieving corporate ends (p. 12) with the chairman in command and an organizational chart to designate who is responsible for taking what action (p. 13). Culbert and Ullmen propose a process of *two-sided accountability partnering* which “conveys the image of goodwill reciprocity leading to straightforward communications, aboveboard politics, authentic teamwork, esprit de corps, and the type of accountability that produces high-quality corporate results” (p. 15). They add,

Two-sided cues people to consider a reciprocal obligation to help one another in the pursuit of company goals... **Accountability** cues people to constrain self-interested pursuits that others might see coming at their expense. *Partnering* indicates a mutuality of interests that sets the stage for effective dialogue and interactive problem solving” (emphasis and bold in text, p. 15).

I agree with the suggestion of accountability being a partnership (Seiling, 1997) and the intent of what they term “two-sided accountability.” Looking more closely, however, they still discuss a hierarchical underpinning, a lack of flexibility, the placing of the “boss” at the center of the relationship. They say that there must be a stand-and-be-counted approach to *two-sides accountable* relationships (p. 84, emphasis from text). These two-sides-accountable relationships are entered into with the general expectation that the parties will cooperate, act supportively and be socially pleasant (p. 82).

Two-sided accountability, like constructive accountability, is a face-to-face activity, acknowledging the need to talk to and communicate with “subordinates.” Yet the term two-sided is problematic: the language suggests that the participants are on opposite sides and must work at “meeting in the middle,” and that being civil and socially pleasant is an obligation. The implication is that a participant is faced with the dilemma of disagreement with someone of higher status and worth, yet is expected to be a partner and provide information openly.

In many organizations, because of differences in rank and status, choices are made as to what information is shared. Feelings of safety and security may be a constant concern. The subordinate will look for “signals” of safety that heighten or diminish feelings of discomfort. He or she will also attempt to identify the level of approachability the boss is willing to allow (after all, bosses have long memories). The boss/subordinate relationship continues to dominate the exchange. Culbert and Ullmen continue by saying,

Two-sided accountability is possible once two or more parties recognize that their individual interests overlap, believe that the other party’s self-interested pursuits can be conducted in a way that furthers mutual objectives, and are able to articulate a way of working together that each believes to be reciprocally advantageous because the political process supports it (p. 81).

I agree with this statement, yet achieving this element of a positive political climate, for some, will be difficult. Changing the political climate is a high level challenge if the mental environment includes feelings of threat and vulnerability. Also, moving to two-sided accountability requires a relaxing of the desire to be seen as credible, a hallmark of what is seen as performing as “the good leader,” (Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Kelley, 1988). This jeopardizes the leader’s desire to be seen as “knowing.” According to Kelley (1988), in order to be seen as credible, “We should have a positive reason to think [the person] is competent and objective. At the very least, we must not have any evidence that [the person] is *incompetent* or *nonobjective*” (p. 118). “Knowing” is the path to credibility in the traditionally accountable world.

In their analysis of accountability, Lebow and Spitzer (2002) “pass through” instead of placing an emphasis on relationships. Again, there is a focus on individualized accountability. The authors state, “Accountability is the issue! If you can’t find a way to get people to be accountable, you’re going to find it hard to make anything work, let alone your business” (p. 7).

They define accountability as “taking personal responsibility for one’s own choices and for the results of those choices to oneself and to others” (p. 241). Their emphasis, as with Koestenbaum and Block (2001) above, is on freedom and responsibility. Their thinking is exemplified by noting that in the control-based workplace leadership is based on 10 percent coaching and mentoring and, in the freedom-based environment, it is 60 percent coaching and mentoring (Lebow and Spitzer, p. 173). “Freedom-based,” according to Lebow and Spitzer, suggests, “People work better when they’re free to do it their way” (p. 19). A visionary leader is required as a “wise counsel” who focuses on values while protecting the organization’s long-term financial health and looking for ways to help people make the freedom-based philosophy successful (p. 186). The leader shifts the focus from performance appraisals to personal development plans that the individual creates (p. 209). Throughout the book, Lebow and Spitzer discuss ten of the biggest control-based initiatives that *destroy* accountability:

1. Incentive programs and pay-for-performance plans
2. Internal competition
3. Performance reviews
4. Forced ranking systems
5. Personal improvement plans
6. Managing people
7. Restrictive policies and procedures
8. Traditional job description
9. Employee recognition programs
10. Missions, visions and values statements

This is a startling list of initiatives that destroy accountability, suggesting that leaders and members must be constantly alert to the ramifications of the design of organizational initiatives. In essence, people *choose* to be accountable when they are not controlled, treated with disrespect

or tied to internal initiatives that invite competition. Lebow and Spitzer also say, "It is in choosing that we become truly accountable both to ourselves and to the community we live and work in" (p. 64). Of course, choices are influenced by the way in which people are governed and "motivated."

Frink and Ferris (1998) state that the knowledge base regarding accountability is remarkably scant. They also say, "Research has included accountability as a social influence variable with increasing frequency." They suggest that the basic concept is that accountability is the perceived potential of being evaluated by someone, and being answerable for decisions or actions. As such, accountability for performance is a fundamental principle of organizational theory. They note that Mitchell, Canavan, Frink and Hopper (1995) define accountability as an external (to the person) or internal perspective: "Accountability (a) emphasizes a system of review of behavior by some constituency, and (b) includes having salient rewards or punishments contingent upon the review." In their study, Frink and Ferris suggest that the degree to which a person anticipates an accounting is related to the amount of attentiveness he or she will pay to an activity. They also see defensibility (the need to defend) as a factor in the amount of attentiveness given to an activity, as well as the specific criteria one perceives as being the basis of evaluation (either formal or informal).

Connors and Smith (1999) work extensively in organizations creating *Cultures of Accountability* (italics throughout the text). Connors and Smith are tightly tied to individual performance. They state, "A *Culture of Accountability* is the most effective culture and is defined as people being accountable to think and act in the manner necessary for their organization to achieve results" (p.7). They also say, "The culture generates results, which... reinforce the future and are part of the culture" (p. 13). A weakness of Connors and Smith is that

they also focus on the individual being solely accountable, skimming over the relational processes that are instrumental to a culture of accountability. Leaders are in control of transitioning to the new culture, de-emphasizing the role of the members as the designers and drivers of cultural realities. Their writings offer clear and definitive “steps to accountability” (See it! Own it! Solve it! And Do it!). They say, “We say these components ‘work together’ because *experiences foster beliefs, beliefs drive actions, and actions produce results*” (p. 13, italics in text). They outline ways to shift a culture to a results orientation.

In a recent article in *Executive Edge*, Connors and Smith (2004) define accountability as “a personal choice to rise above your circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary to achieve desired results.” They add, “This definition includes a mindset of asking, ‘what else can I do to rise above my circumstances and achieve the desired results?’” (p. 10). My concern is that this philosophy can bring competition to the forefront when efforts are not understood as relationship-based.

Finally, Redding (2004) writes about the need to hold oneself accountable. He states, “It seems that holding ourselves accountable appears to be a key step to helping others do the same” (p. 63). He suggests that it is “a shift from holding someone accountable to helping people hold themselves accountable, which includes holding ourselves accountable” (p. 64). He notes that holding people accountable includes each of us responding to what we are told to do, finding problems and mistakes, following up with interrogations, punishing non-performance and rewarding performance. This places accountability firmly in a command and control orientation.

In a more encouraging stance, Redding goes on to say that holding ourselves accountable is responding to what we see needs to be done; it is to inform people about what is going on and where we are struggling; it is to offer tangible help to resolve issues and achieve objectives and

to ask for help as well; and it is to appreciate each other's skills and contributions. Although suggesting the relational aspects of accountability, he focuses on the individualized, internal aspects of accountability.

This limited review of traditionally based accountability writings largely demonstrates the mechanistic form of management at work, justifying the stance of the knowing leader as the one who must know and who is there to hold the members accountable for doing what is expected. This approach to leadership is, unfortunately, perpetuated in many of our current teaching/learning practices of business schools.

Perpetuating Current Practices of Accountability Through Business Educational Systems

When the Harvard legal-case-based approach came to define the discipline of management as a science, the "founding fathers" laid claim to modern assumptions of rationality, universality and objectivity. Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996) suggest that, "Most contemporary theory and practice in organization science is still conducted with a modernist framework" (p. 362). Some academics are now suggesting it is time to revise the boundaries set forth in current management education and learning (Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003, p. 85).

In my view, this commitment to a modernist, mechanistic conception of the organization continues to influence academic teachings in business. They both sustain the top-down accountability orientation and impede the development of a constructive, collaborative alternative (Donaldson, 2002). Recently, in the *Academy of Management News*, Mitroff (2004) called for the elimination of several fallacies that have been allowed to "infect our business degree programs," (p. 7) suggesting that the very programs that teach organizational science are themselves toxic by nature. Mitroff notes that they demonstrate:

1. A mean-spirited and distorted view of human nature;

2. A narrow, outdated, and repudiated notion of ethics;
3. A narrow definition of the role of management in human affairs;
4. An overly reified conception of the “sub-disciplines;”
5. A sense of learned helplessness and hopelessness among faculties” (p. 7).

Mitroff suggested these fallacies permeate the cultures of educational institutions in general. These fallacies may also be prevalent in the teachings that result from the cultures of these institutions. Roberts (1996) also sees business education as a vehicle for underpinning rationalization in organizations. He states,

The business school can be seen as one of the vehicles of what Weber saw as the progressive rationalization of the social world. In disseminating “best practice” to successive generations of students there is a usually implicit belief in the possibility of the progressive rationalization of action; a ready embrace of the modernist assumption of the progressive and cumulative character of knowledge (p. 55, in Clegg and Ross-Smith, 2003, p. 86).

Because theories are often designed through the modernist eyes, it is time to revisit the accepted theories of the past still taught in universities. Among the current theories that add support and credibility to traditional “rational” practices of individual accountability are the following:

Agency Theory

The prevalent description of Americans for the past one hundred and fifty years has been and remains that they are individualistic and achievement-oriented. They place a high value on personal success and on the assumption that *all people* first act through self-interest. Agency theory justifies this thinking.

Agency Theory (V.H. Voorm, 1964) states that organizational leaders (and members) often act in ways that maximize their own personal interests at the cost of investors and owners (and organizational members) who lose value as a result of these actions (Jensen and Meckling,

1976). Mitroff (2004) suggests it is one of the prominent theories that “assume that humans are ruthless, motivated solely by greed, opportunism and selfishness” (p. 7-8).

Agency theory emphasizes the economic exchange relationship, which places little emphasis on trust. Whitener, Brodt, Korsgaard & Werner (1998) state

An agency theory lens highlights the formal economic context and self-interest motive, as well as the behavioral consequences. It also delineates factors that contribute to the risk of opportunism and identifies how the exchange relationship can be structured to minimize this risk (p. 515).

Agency theory also offers an explanation for managerial activities such as monitoring and control (Whitener et al, 1998, p. 514). In the traditional mode of monitoring and control, the theory limits individual activities through micromanagement practices, limiting innovative thinking on the part of those doing the work. In focusing on who-specifically-does-what, the theory also limits collaborative action.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory states that organizations conform to internal norms held about sound organizing (Donaldson, 2002, p. 101). It describes forces leading to a tendency to “sameness” across firms (Colbert, 2004, p. 344). It “binds participants together with a common set of understandings about the organizational way of doing things” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 303). Such thinking, as with agency theory, emphasizes predictability and calls for maximizing control. It suggests suppression of variance, minimizes innovative action and ensures conformity. It may also be a barrier to the acceptance and expansion of out-of-the-norm action while strengthening the need for individual accountability.

Unquestioned acceptance of current norms perpetuates practices of one-way, individual accountability and limits opportunities to expand investments in relationships. Institutional

theory itself is a prescription for rigid normalcy. In today's workplace, members are seeking opportunities to invest themselves in their work. A more flexible, ongoing, relationship-based model of sensemaking and a new, more open translation of institutional theory are called for in today's workplace.

The Resource-Based View Theory

The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, focuses on explaining competitive advantage as an outcome of the development and deployment of valuable organizational resources (physical and human). However, interpersonal resources, according to the theory, are unique, vague and not fully understandable; they defy identity and replication. Colbert (2004) says,

Constructive, socially embedded resources are highly strategically important (in the sense that they are inscrutable to competitors) because of their inherent complexity, but they are difficult to deliberately build for precisely the same reason" (p. 347).

In this thinking, socially embedded resources may be perceived as a personal way-of-working, a result of luck or related to a context. (An example might be Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric.) For this reason, interpersonal approaches are not seen as retrievable, transferable or repeatable (Teece, 1998, p. 67).

This view may extinguish attempts to identify, expand and incorporate what is seen as unique approaches to working together. Consequently, this view might see practices of constructive accountability as based in the personalities and relationships of certain people or groups as beyond duplication. RBV theory makes it less likely that ongoing CA will be seen as a practicable, ongoing possibility across groups and organizations.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) theory (Bateman and Organ, 1983) suggests that “extra-role” contributions (working beyond the call of duty) are unique and beneficial. These activities are notable because of their not-usually-seen-here character and, as such, they are not expected in everyday activities on the job. The difference between organizational citizenship behavior and activities of constructive accountability is located in (1) the “occasionalness” of OCB (Bolino and Turnley, 2003, p. 69) and the “ongoingness” of CA, (2) the individual focus of OCB and the “we-ness” nature of CA, and (3) OCB sees the potential of neglecting assigned work to perform praiseworthy OCB activities where the focus in CA is on these activities being part of normal work.

Within OCB there is an implication of demonstrating loyalty through the willingness to “step up” when needed. Although OCB is encouraged, it is not expected that one would perform these activities on an ongoing basis—nor are the activities seen as needed at all times. Also, OCB does not suggest that the people performing the extra-role activities are continually involved or contributive to decision-making, as in CA.

The CA approach does not suggest ignoring OCB. It does suggest that many of the practices seen as “stepping up” in OCB are characteristic to CA as an ongoing part of the workplace process of relating and accomplishing together.

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) (Janssen and Van Yperen, 2004; Campbell, 2002, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) states that leaders favor certain employees because they do things that “facilitate leader job performance” and demonstrate an above-average sense of responsibility. Janssen & Van Yperen (2004) suggest that “the quality of the exchanges that

develop between employees and their leaders are predictive of performance-related and attitudinal job outcomes, especially for the employees” (p. 371). Campbell (2002) notes,

These employees form a core of individuals on whom the supervisor counts heavily and whose commitment to the leader and to work-unit goals far exceeds that required by the formal work contract. They become extensions of the manager and take responsibility for many of the work unit’s critical functions (p. 53).

This suggests that the favored few are depended on while other employees are placed in the role of “less than dependable” and “less than committed.” Potentially, the “less-than” members experience less interaction and connection with the leader and opportunities to collaborate and contribute in meaningful ways are also potentially limited.

Clearly, the tendency in this theory is for more rigorous accounting practices for those expected not to perform as well. Instead of actively inviting all members into the process of contribution, the leader anticipates fewer contributive practices from those outside of the favored few. This is contrary to the relational elements of CA that invite all members to contribute their talents in interactive ways.

The focus and propagation of these and other deficit-based theories all work against open, genuine, collaborative practices. Such management theories were developed in the 20th century when managers alone were expected to plan, organize, direct and control. These theories-seen-as-fact continue in the 21st century to focus on the deficiencies of organizational members. They subtly call for command and control of the less favored instead of calling for real and deep involvement and relational participation between and across status and role.

Yet, according to Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996), there is a ray of hope. “However, across many branches of the sciences and humanities—indeed, some would say across the culture more generally—a new sensibility has slowly emerged” (p. 362). Language is emerging

that includes appreciation, relatedness, co-construction, relational responsibility. Harvey and Buckley (2002) argue, “We must delete some of the basic wisdom of the 20th century and, at the same time, update the foundation concepts in management, as we enter the 21st century” (p. 368). They add that looking through current textbooks “gives one the impression that current organizations still are concerned with old concepts, e.g., span-of-control, line/staff differentiation, and chain-of-command (many are not)” (p. 368).

A new appreciation of organizational members and the use of collaborative transformational approaches, such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Srivastva, 1987), are igniting positive change in organizations and cannot be ignored. Management theories are also moving to a more open model of exchange. Leader-member-exchange theory (LMX) is, for example, beginning to seek involvement and openness of the leader, leading to more extended input by all members instead of the favored few. George Graen, the originator of the LMX theory, noted this as “Stage IV” of LMX theory (personal conversation, 1997).

Unfortunately, many organizations, with the help of academics, “visionary leaders” and consultants, are just reframing traditional accountability into more “politically correct” language. For example, the words “two-way accountability,” as applied between bosses and subordinates, espoused by Culbert and Ulman (2001). Stringent hierarchical and bureaucratic relationships are disguised but remain in place, simply converting traditional concepts into a new language.

Toward Reconstruction: Constructive Accountability

For many, the term “constructive” appears to be paradoxical to today’s traditional form of accountability. How can something so often experienced as demeaning and painful be constructive? Missing in the current definitions and practices of accountability is the implicit understanding that all members of the organization socially create their organizations together.

Each person is working in partnership with others, even when it is not obvious in the moment. Co-construction is so very apparent in the organizational context, whether it is strength-based or weakness-focused, and yet it goes “undiscovered” and ignored—especially in the application of accountability. It is in this respect that I introduce the concept of constructive accountability. As offered earlier, I define it as *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace.*

A new understanding of accountability, as a positive, mutually constructive and responsible process, encourages people to say, “I am here and I’m going to work with others to make it matter.” When accountability is constructive, the role of organizational members at all levels is to work collaboratively and productively with others on an ongoing basis. In my view, when awareness of the constructive form of accountability is the norm, knowledge exchange, support and resource sharing are present. Collaborative learning opportunities are more possible, suggesting that accountability is not “performed by those above.” Accountability that is constructive is part of collaborative practice, spreading the role of making suggestions and offerings that positively impact the mutually constructed work of others; *accountability exists inside relationships with others.*

I will offer throughout this text the dimensions of accountability in the workplace. However, Figure 1.1 is useful in highlighting the contrasts between the two forms of accountability.

Figure 1.1: The Dimensions of Accountability

<u>Traditional and Current Accountability</u>	<u>Constructive Accountability</u>
Activities performed after the incident	An ongoing process
Often a one-sided discussion	Co-authorship of outcomes
Focus on deficits (or deficiencies)	Focuses on strengths
Activation based on authority	Occurrences across status and title
Demanding, giving, taking	Offering, exchanging, advancing
Potentially lower outcomes	Stronger outcomes
Identification and punishment of the one who is at fault	Learning/growth benefits for participants
Focuses on “Don’t do it again”	Focuses on “What can <i>we</i> do?”
Borders around knowledge-sharing	Open learning and sharing of knowledge
Focuses on corrections	Focuses on relations, responsibility, support, informing and coaching
Lower participation, higher avoidance	Involvement and collaboration
Based on fear and threat	A sharing of accountability in relationship

This study focuses on the possibility that organizational tactics can be used to affect the use of talents, skills and positive relationships inside organizations through the *understanding* that the movement of accountability into the mutuality of work is foundational and functional across member levels and title. The case for more attention to accountability and how it can be constructive is based on the recognition that a relational, ongoing process of work changes the “activity” of “being accountable.” Such a process *incorporates* accountability into participants’ ongoing activities. Thus, constructive accountability exists in a context of shared knowledge, mutual synergy, open communication, the development of relational connections and partnerships, shared sensemaking and decision-making. It is facilitated by a new understanding/recognition of the need for mutual understanding, relationship and action.

How an organization functions, its effectiveness and its responses to its external environment, are all tied into the interactive performances of its people. Constructive accountability, as a relational process, calls for the co-construction of accomplishment and consequences making integrative performance possible. Within CA, members have and give permission to actively bring others “into their work.” There is an appearance of being individually responsible, yet there is common, accepted, co-constructed knowledge and practice that recognizes action and outcomes are mutually generated. One calls others to engage in interactive sensemaking and action as needed. Seeking the resources, strengths, skills and knowledge of others is seen as part of a process that leads to best performance, decisions and practices. When a “bad” decision is made, all who have contributed (or have chosen not to contribute) have been part of the process whether they are directly aware of doing so or not. Recognizing and educating what CA “is” establishes the “we-ness” of sensemaking, decision-making and action—even when acting “alone.”

Examples of the practice of constructive accountability as an ongoing process of interaction include the following:

- Casual, even accidental, meetings of co-members: walking down the hall, seeing a colleague, and asking how he or she is doing on a project of mutual interest.
- Calling a colleague on the telephone and asking about past experience with a frustrating issue and asking about or brainstorming ways to approach the issue.
- Participating at a meaningful level in the strategic design of a process and planning.
- Reflecting with others over lunch about what could be done to make better sense of a past or current situation.
- Casually exchanging funny and relevant stories and metaphors that shape feelings of connectedness and unfettered exchange.

- Purposely contacting another department, group or person regarding how one's own department's anticipated activities or new thinking might impact the other department's work or how the two areas could work together to solve a recurring situation.
- Offering encouragement, input and support to others (including one's supervisor) when he or she is working under challenging circumstances.
- Advocating the best efforts of fellow members to others.
- Attending and contributing to meetings that are directly and indirectly connected to one's own work.
- Listening to learn at every opportunity.
- Being alert to resources, both known (seminars, journals, magazines, etc.) and unknown (accidental learnings and offerings of others) not currently obvious within and outside the company that might create new alternatives, awarenesses and conclusions.
- Noticing and hearing "something different" and asking questions that clarify, explain and educate.
- Noticing and hearing "something confirming" and doing the same.

Constructive accountability improves the effectiveness of positive, contributive, interlocked behaviors. According to Weick (1969), "Interlocked behaviors are the basic elements that constitute any organization. They consist of repetitive, reciprocal, contingent behaviors that develop and are maintained between two or more actors" (p. 91). It is through the recognition that participants' work is interrelated, co-constructed and essential to the achievement of others that interlocked behaviors 'broaden and build' opportunities to succeed for the members and the organization.

As interlocked behaviors of relationship, CA also improves the effectiveness of "constructive arguing." Researchers know that conflict is natural and even necessary to innovative thinking and creativity. "The challenge," according to Eisenhardt, Kahwajy and Bourgeois (1999), "is to encourage members...to argue without destroying their ability to work

together” (p. 172). Toleration of non-constructive conflict cannot be ignored. Ignoring problems that need attention or not getting involved when attention is called for suggests negative behaviors are appropriate.

CA is not a one time “why-did-you-do-that” conversation or reactive confrontation. It is also not participating in win/lose activities. It is an ongoing, mutually valued process of exchange in everyday work life that helps participants achieve through continuous, co-assessment and expansion of workplace strengths. CA is essential to making sense of what can and cannot be done and to the expansion of the desire to work together effectively. Constructive accountability is about cooperation and collaboration, learning and serving, agreeing and disagreeing, and making sense through a foundation of valuing relationships.

Suggesting CA As a Social Constructionist Approach to Accountability

Freedman and Combs (1996) say, “Using the metaphor of social construction leads us to consider the ways in which every person’s social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other beings and human institutions...” (p.1). It is within these sensemaking provisions of social construction that I have entered into this study, thus influencing both my perceptions and the frame I put around the thought of moving from individual to constructive accountability. In this light, Gergen offers a series of criteria he calls “A Family of Criteria for Social Constructionist Practices” (1996, Appendix A). These criteria (as seen through my interpretation) are very useful in identifying practices that may be viewed as constructively accountable. Gergen (1996) offers the point that social construction is “just a conversation that moves into the gray areas.” These conversational practices challenge realities, not setting up a final truth, acknowledging that there is continually much to learn and encouraging a focus on possibilities. They also honor traditions and the blinders they create

while using the traditions to broaden, build and create. In the context of CA, social construction is an invitation to converse and continue in conversation about the “realities” and relationships that encourage conversations in organizations. We are invited to explore new possibilities of relationship in the workplace and in other venues of our lives where accountability is continually present. It is movement toward a future building of positively accountable action and relationship.

The Present Study

The purpose of this dissertation is to introduce, develop and support a concept of constructive accountability that is practicable and practical in the workplace. It is to shift the conception of accountability as constructive, moving it forward into the process of work. The following are my particular objectives:

- (1) To develop a conception of accountability that is both constructive and collaborative, and to illuminate a range of organizational practices that would realize this conception in action.
- (2) To explore the potential of constructive accountability for increasing the involvement and contribution of members to the organization, and ultimately the efficacy of the organization.
- (3) To develop and expand the idea that constructive accountability, when understood, appreciated and activated, can contribute to personal and group well-being and to a positive organizational culture.
- (4) To expand, even change, the perception and thinking instrumental to the practice and experience of accountability.

This thesis proposes a re-construction and reframing of this well-recognized and dreaded word, accountability, as a relational, strength-based broadening and building process within everyday work. It proposes to move accountability into the realm of beneficial relationships and the

development of practices where we learn from each other and co-construct current and future performance. My hope also is to highlight past beneficial and workable yet unacknowledged processes of constructive accountability. It is also to make it possible for practitioners to experience more meaning and satisfaction within day-to-day work. To explore the concept and potentials of CA, I have carried out intensive interviews with fourteen high level managers in twelve organizations. I have asked them questions about traditional accountability practices, introduced the concept of CA and explored with them their ideas on its applicability and limitations. Chapter two includes a description of the research process, outlines the questions asked in the conversations, and identifies the participants in the conversations on accountability. Chapter Three will include the context and text of the conversations and presents the highlights of these contributions to my understanding of CA. Chapter Four will include the themes and interpretations of those conversations and will contain an enriched account of CA and its potential. The chapter is shaped around the “components of traditional accountability.” Chapter 5 will talk about ways of “moving toward constructive accountability” in organizational life, touching on suggestions for further research and study.

Chapter 2

Research Procedures and Context

Valuable new management models are flowing into theory and practice that support the ongoing renewal, survival and prosperity of organizations. These models offer “new” forms of common sense that have revised management approaches to involvement of organizational members in running effective organizations. Regardless of what is offered, the basic principles of involvement, collaboration, flexibility, adaptability and contribution of members are present. Collectively, these new models call for a change in mindset of how people work together at all levels of the organization. Yet inside most of these new approaches, the traditional concept of accountability remains unquestioned.

This chapter covers the procedures used in my research, identifies the organizations and people who participated in the dialogues, and presents the questions that guided these discussions.

Research Procedure

To locate the thoughts and experiences of accountability held by organizational leaders and members, I chose dialogue for the methodology. The term “interview” was a bit more formal than I wanted to project to those participating, thus, I contacted the participants and invited them into a “conversation on accountability.” The participants appeared to respond positively to this language, with one participant describing it as “less formal and more loose.” He was relieved “not to be interrogated”—or treated as if he “must know it all.” The purpose of the

conversations was to explore the participant's ideas and experiences of accountability and to introduce the theory and practice of constructive accountability. Special attention was given to possible practices of CA, that it might become a practical process of working in a learning-way-of-working-together. In essence, my hope was to offer the concept of how to openly bring accountability forward into the everyday activities of work. One person participated in each conversation.

One of the goals for identifying conversation participants was to have diverse types of organizations represented, preferably with leaders at the upper management level. I purposely included women; five of the fourteen participants in the twelve organizations were women. Also, insofar as possible, I wanted people who were actively involved in working with organizational members in an administrative or educational function. In one case, a VP of marketing was included because of his approach to working with both his own people and his role of influencing those who work directly with internal and external customers. One participant, although directly responsible for the operations of an organization, claimed to have no useful title. He felt titles are limiting and often counterproductive. Another person, responsible for "American Operations," was approached because of his functional authority and influence on his organization.

The conversations were designed as an inquiry into the nature or "construction" of accountability inside the work worlds of organizational members. As an inquiry method, the attempt was to attend to both the awareness of the person and the social constructions of accountability.

Organizations Represented

There was a concerted attempt to have conversations with members of diverse types of organizations. Although manufacturing was represented by several organizations, I also succeeded in initiating dialogues with managers in organizations representing long-term care, government, a research group and a floricultural organization. The organizations included:

Name of Organization	Type of Organization	Communication Mode
Norwood Tool	Manufacturing, medical instruments	In Person
Sea Boats, Inc.	Manufacturing, leisure boats	Telephone
Federal Consulting Group	A federal agency	Telephone
TenderCare	Long term healthcare	In person
Samsonite	Manufacturing, luggage	In Person
Sauder Woodworking	Manufacturing, furniture	In Person
Yoders	Floricultural organization	In Person
Proctor and Gamble	Manufacturing, detergents	In Person
Hunter Douglas WFD	Manufacturing, "window fashions"	Telephone (2)
StarTek	Call-center organization	Telephone
Herman Miller	Manufacturing, office furniture	Telephone
CSIR – South Africa	Para-governmental research org.	Via Johann Roux (2)

An interview with a former employee at the management level with Proctor and Gamble is included. Proctor and Gamble, though an early leader in participative practices, when contacted, was reluctant to provide opportunities for a conversation. In response to my request,

the comment was, “We’ve done so in the past and it turned out to be, from our standpoint, a disaster, so we do not do it anymore.” Thus, I turned to a past employee who values Proctor and Gamble as a learning place for her own leadership practices.

My colleague, Johann Roux, Ph.D., held two of the conversations in South Africa. Roux consults on organizational issues and is a private coach and therapist. He is also a colleague who is familiar with my work and a dialogue resource. Constructive accountability is not a new topic to him. Furthermore, when doing research in another culture, it is a huge advantage to have the assistance of a local person who knows and lives inside the culture. I am ever grateful for his generosity in aiding my research process. As a social constructionist, he is especially interested in the topic. He says,

The conversations emphasize the importance of what can be accomplished, especially in the light of our country’s history. It is a very useful idea in regards to the strong ethics focus now present in South Africa. It provides a venue to bring ethics to ground level and to live them visibly. Constructive accountability must become part of the values and strategy of working together in organizations in South Africa (July, 2004, personal conversation).

Three completed conversations were dropped from the study. A conversation held in an electronics-manufacturing firm in Pittsburgh, PA, with three women at the manager level of HR was excluded because the company had implemented a major downsizing across all HR Departments just the day before the conversation. The cut back was very difficult for most of the HR departments within the division. Within their particular department, it was noted, it was not as dramatic because they were already “cut to the bone” and was “handling it well.” In fact, because two of the three managers accepted an offered buyout, their department would be hiring. The conversation was dramatically candid regarding their ability to work for (not with) the

“Japanese-culture and mentality.” They talked candidly of the struggles they experienced in dealing with issues that are an outcome of the culture—emphasizing the lack of accountability when working in the organization’s environment. I decided not to directly quote the conversation in the writings.

The second conversation dropped from the research dialogue was held by telephone with Frances Hesselbein, Chairman of the Board of Governors of The Drucker Foundation, now known as *Leader to Leader*, and noted editor and writer of leadership books. She is a former chief executive of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. Hesselbein was interested in the topic of the conversation, but, perhaps because the conversation was conducted by telephone, seemed to be dictating her responses, giving a sense of not thinking deeply on the subject. As a result, the conversation was brief and to the point, almost well rehearsed, as if she were using her “book” personality to say what she *should* say.

She did offer the following comments that seem relevant to accountability as related to governance in both nonprofit and for profit organizations. Hesselbein feels strongly that the role of accountability in nonprofit organizations is a vital one. Focused on the financial and inter-relational aspects of managers managing, she stated,

Social sector organizations have to be impeccable managers of relationships and money. One of the many exciting things about these organizations is that we have to be stringent in management because we have no margin for errors. We have to always be aware of this. Everything organizations do helps to build a healthy and inquisitive community and hopefully encourages engagement, involvement and collaboration.

In an article in the Drucker Foundation publication *Leader to Leader*, Hesselbein wrote, “Social sector organizations have moved from expecting to have their good intentions rewarded to holding themselves accountable for results.” I asked her, “Why is this so important?”

It is extremely important. Maybe at one time we could say “please reward us [nonprofits] for our intentions.” Now those days are gone. Now the results must be measured and documented. We must be accountable. Doing it well is a very powerful message to our communities and us. Organizations cannot be effective unless they accept accountability as essential. Without it there will be no organization. Social sector organizations have to be impeccable managers of relationships and money. One of the many exciting things about these organizations is that we have to be stringent in management because we have no margin for errors. We have to always be aware of this.

Hesselbein’s statements, though focusing on the non-profit sector, adds relevance to the importance of accountability at the leadership level of all organizations. Although not at this point meant for non-profit organizations, ethics-focused legislations such as Sarbanes-Oxley most likely will soon move into that sector, focusing on accountability for governance and impeccable management. Although her comments were made prior to the legislation, her call for accountability for impeccable management is pertinent to management of relations and money in all organizations.

The original conversation held at Herman-Miller with a Senior VP was also dropped. Shortly after the conversation he left as a result of the company's first-ever lay off. Because I could not locate him, I dropped the conversation from the process.

After completion of the conversations, the face-to-face and computer-generated recordings were transcribed and examined for purposes of interpretation and direct quotation within the thesis.

Conversation Protocol

The questions used in the conversations were designed to (1) identify the participants’ understanding of accountability in organizations as it is practiced at this time, (2) attempt to locate the culture of accountability in their particular organization, (3) clarify what “constructive

accountability” is or might be in organizations and (4) solicit information on the value and process of introducing CA in organizations. The language, order and primacy of the questions varied in the course of some of the conversations.

I opened the conversations by asking them to identify themselves and their company for the recordings. Then in an attempt to get some information about the participant, I asked the following question. In many cases, additional questions followed to identify their tenure in the organization and their previous roles in organizational life.

JGS: Could we take a moment for you to describe your role and responsibilities in [the company]? What is your interest/focus in your work and why is this important to you?

The goal, early in the conversation, was to get a picture of the participant's general understanding of accountability as it is presently practiced. This was done to create a benchmark of their understanding of accountability as it is applied at the present and to identify a comparison point, a place from which to move in introducing a new concept or understanding of what constructive accountability might look like in organizations. At this point, I did not ask the specific question of how the individual understood accountability but how organizations and members in general perceive accountability. Nevertheless, many preferred to focus on their own organization. This was done in an attempt to avoid the participants being seen as wrong at a later time in the conversation.

JGS: How do you think the organizational members perceive accountability in most organizations today? And, why?

In order to further identify practices of accountability in the organization, the following question was asked regarding how accountability is applied and how effective the process is in the participant's organization. Many had to think about this question for a moment. Their answers often centered on performance review processes.

JGS: How is accountability utilized/activated in most organizations of today? How are people held accountable specifically in your organization? Describe how effective you think most of these efforts are.

Next, I turned the conversations toward relationships and the impact that current applications of accountability have on workplace relationships. In some cases, I asked them to think about an accountability situation that went well and to comment on that particular incident.

JGS: Within the current interpretation of how accountability is achieved, are relationships between the participants for the most part improved or depleted following an accountability encounter? If they are improved, what brings about the improvement? Or, if depleted, why does this happen and why?

In some cases, the participants used the word "feedback" when talking about accountability that is outside of the evaluation process. My own experience of "feedback" in the workplace was that it was often a one-way conversation about how something was being done right or wrong. I was curious as to how the participants perceived the word and what it might mean to those receiving feedback. Thus, the following question:

JGS: The word “feedback” has been much talked about in recent years in attempting to improve performance. From your viewpoint, is this an act of accountability and what are your thoughts on “feedback?”

Many see personal responsibility as a synonym for accountability. In some conversations, I added the following question:

JGS: Tell me your thoughts on the status of personal responsibility in organizations today. Why is it this way? Tell me a story that reflects these thoughts.

At this point, I offered into the conversation an extended description of the concept of constructive accountability. In some cases, I read the following twice or offered the participant an opportunity to read the information.

***Constructive accountability* is an ongoing process of relating together, of talking and working together in productive and responsible ways. CA conversations include the exchange of information in the form of questions and statements, sharing and looking at concerns and seeking new and different ideas or just talking about how things are going right now; the most casual and the most formal exchanges are accountability encounters that can have deep meaning in regards to individual, group and organizational achievement. It is not about deciding after the fact that things went right or wrong, it is looking at things as they occur and deciding now, with others, what needs to be done to correct and re-correct.**

Many times I expanded on this definition and asked if they had any questions regarding what was being offered and requested. They would often pause and think about it for a moment

to think about what the information really means to them. Eventually, we went to the following question.

JGS: As a new view of accountability, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace?

I wanted to focus on CA being an ongoing, everyday activity. For that reason, I asked the question,

JGS: As someone who worked as an internal person for 20+ years, I feel that there are pockets of constructive accountability already happening in our organizations—that the key is to make people aware of the definition of CA as something they do all the time, but are not aware of it. It is to make it possible for them to recognize accountability as not punishment but part of how we work all the time. This would make it possible for a culture of accountability to be present at all times in recognizable ways. What are your thoughts on this? Many were times this was shortened or I expanded on it in an effort to clarify.

The following question was asked in order to continue to focus on the relational side of CA.

JGS: There is a strong interactive component to CA. Organizations can decide, through the interactive norms of the workplace, whether constructive accountability becomes a part of how people work together. How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of their organization?

It seemed important to address the relevance of constructive accountability to organizations in the conversations.

JGS: My thinking is that, CA, as an ongoing exchange process, supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes in groups and organizations. Some would say that an ongoing process of CA could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how? And, if not, why not?

Also important to the conversation was the participant's thoughts on how CA could become part of the day-to-day actions of organizational members. How it could occur would be significant in carrying constructive accountability into practice in the workplace. This question revealed enthusiasm for constructive accountability and its value to the people involved and their organizations.

JGS: Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members?

The conversations included activities of constructive accountability. *Account offering*, *account exchanging* and *account advancing* (chapter 4), the core activities of constructive accountability, were present, making mutually constructed understandings possible. The conversations demonstrated the expansion of understanding, questioning, statements of position, and activities of seeking sense. Within these occurrences there were instances of confusion and learning. Without exception, the conversations flowed with interest and animation, containing

opportunities for connection and the occurrence of “ah ha” moments. We were together constructing an awareness of what constructive accountability “is.”

During the conversation with Tom LeBlanc of Samsonite I received a symbol they offer to employees, an object that highlights the company’s values that are integrated into their philosophy of management. The symbol is a marble with a quote that calls for treating others as you would like to be treated. Another organization arranged for a tour by a manager in the organization with the goal to illustrate “the way we treat our people.” Another insisted on a tour of their product room. These products were noted as innovations that occur because people work well together and “are accountable for their work.” These companies are proud of the way they treat their people. Nonetheless, most continue to apply accountability in the traditional way—and many continue to practice, although camouflaged, the traditional practices of command and control management. All of these leaders are well meaning and caring about the way people work together. My hope is that learning about the mutuality of CA and benefits of moving accountability forward into everyday relationships will affect their visions of the future.

Chapter three, while not including the full manuscripts, offers an in depth look at the conversations.

Chapter 3

Managers Speak: Accountability in Question

Organizations cannot be effective unless they accept accountability as essential.
Without it there will be no organization.
Francis Hesselbein

It [CA] applies in personal and family relationships, parent
and child relationships, the same as it applies in organizations.
Diana Sadighi

This chapter presents an account of the conversations regarding issues of traditional and constructive accountability. Each account includes the organizational context of the conversations and the persons interviewed, some in more depth than others. These accounts also include relevant excerpts of each conversation and brief comments on their content. This chapter will focus on fourteen interviews (conversations) in twelve companies that offered rich resources for thinking through the traditional views of accountability, along with possible transformation to a more constructive orientation.¹ This chapter does not summarize or distill the major outcomes of the conversations. Rather, the attempt here is to present the “raw data” pertinent to the topic of the conversations. The following chapter will elaborate on the significant themes emerging from these interviews to weave them into a more enriched view of accountability that is constructive.²

¹ These conversations are based in the accounts of those interviewed and may not represent the thinking of all members of the management group or the organization in general.

² In the writings that focus on South African text, I use the spelling of several words as they do, with an “s” instead of a “z” to honor their language form.

In most cases, the definition of CA was offered in written form (just prior to the conversation) and verbiage (perhaps reading it to the participant). Further explanations were added when necessary to clarify the meaning. The participants were then offered an opportunity to ask questions. Other than additional clarifying statements, the statement introducing constructive accountability within the conversations remained the same. In the following conversation highlights, square brackets “[]” occasionally mark the beginning and end of clarifying words have been inserted.

1. Sea Ray Boats, Inc.: Looking at the Waves of CA

Headquartered in Knoxville, Tennessee, the Brunswick Boat Group is the largest maker of pleasure boats in the world. The 2003 net sales were \$1.6 billion. Sea Ray, a division of the Boat Group, makes pleasure boats from 16 to 100 feet and various other high-performance, offshore fishing and pontoon boats from 10 to 26 feet. Located in Knoxville, TN, Sea Ray is “the world’s largest manufacturer of superior quality pleasure boats” producing more than 40 models. Founded in 1959, Sea Ray, one of the first boat builders to use fiberglass and other high-tech composite materials in pleasure boats, has remained innovative. Their customers have made it possible for J.D. Power and Associates, a prestigious research organization, to rank Sea Ray highest in customer service in their industry.

Cynthia Trudell, a Canadian, described as “an old manufacturing hand at manufacturing,” is President of Sea Ray. Prior to moving to Sea Ray in 1998 she was chairperson and president of General Motors Corporation’s Saturn Corporation—the first woman ever to run a major U.S. car operation. She went to Saturn with great hoopla, with one article headline saying, “New Saturn Leader Trudell Shatters Glass Ceiling. “A woman making it to the top in one of the last

bastions of white, male, old-boyism is cause for celebration,” noted Lesley Hazelton, the author of the article.

Trudell, hailed as a high achiever and savior of Saturn could, it was said, “get results without knocking heads.” She was to follow through with decisions made by predecessors to launch Saturn’s first new line of cars in a decade—a midsize sedan and station wagon that promised to make Saturn sprightly once again. Customers quickly rejected the car. She was soon faced with the decision to lay off nearly 500 workers. Her time at Saturn turned her to looking for opportunities outside of the automobile industry.

Although the glass ceiling and business disasters are certainly not only limited to big business—or to women, Trudell certainly “made it,” traveling a rather extraordinary route. She has a PhD in Physical Chemistry, a rather unusual background for a business leader in the auto and boat manufacturing industry. When I asked her how she got here, she responded,

Carefully. In those days you were an associate professor for at least a third of your career. I decided I liked to learn about the sciences but perhaps I could go in a different direction. I had this tension for management and worked my way through the value chain. And really, I’m always surprised, I actually apply everything I learned in physical chemistry in what I am doing now.

She talked of her beginning at Ford Motor Company as a Chemical Process Engineer and the immediate threat of being victim of what they called a “RIF,” a reduction in force. She said,

When I was at Ford, I was hired in July and faced possible lay off in November. It was not pleasant. It was awful, and I remember it to this day. From that experience, I learned that you have to do the best you can to avoid laying people off. I know what it is to be threatened with losing your job.

We talked of my own short four-year career at Ford Motor Company and the experience of being laid off when the same corporate-wide RIF brought a pause to my own career. We commiserated about being a woman and working “out in the plant where the world is different.” She said, “I found at Ford that if you were in the trenches as a manager, you had to have a bowl of nails for breakfast every morning.” The description fit perfectly.

Her response to the question “How do you think accountability is perceived in most organizations today?” was based on her own organizational experience.

I have found in most cases clear signs of a dysfunctional accountability that causes people to fear being held accountable. I’ve been part of a lot of different organizations in three countries. If I see fear, I know I have to look at the structure and the people to determine what is bringing the fear... When I go into an organization and mention accountability, heads either nod as to who is accountable for what or they look at me with fear. In most operations, the line operations tend to know their accountabilities but often the structure is not set up for them to be able to do their work. If what they are accountable for is clear and clean and crisp and who has control, it works better... One place I am concerned about is the staff function. It becomes more difficult to hold people accountable because quantitative measurement has less value; qualitative is more in use and it is more confusing.

Turning to what organizational members think about accountability, she responded:

I think two things have to be there to make people have a healthy attitude about being held accountable: (1) If you don’t have a very clearly defined, understood and practiced value system, people can be very confused as to what they are being held accountable for. Boundaries are blurred. With all the corporate scandals, people didn’t feel they were accountable. They did not understand the boundaries. They thought they could stretch those boundaries and it wouldn’t matter. They stepped outside the boundaries. And (2), I really feel that understood [corporate] values are essential in order to create a healthy

climate for accountability. People then know their moral and ethical boundaries and now they can focus on how they [need to] achieve within those boundaries.

In her response to the question regarding the utilization/activation of accountability, she questioned how clear their own approach to accountability at Sea Ray is. She offered her thoughts on the definitions of responsibility and accountability.

It is really an internal question. Normally, we say whatever the responsibilities are of an individual, but I am not sure that we are making the true connection [to] what they are accountable for. Responsibility is your scope of engagement...this is how you will engage in your responsibility role. Accountability is what you hold them accountable for, the results of what that person is accountable for contributing. Often I will see leaders hold someone accountable for different results in isolation to the system. You are holding one accountable for one thing and someone else to another. I see it key that you hold an individual and the group accountable. You have to connect them to the system.

In response to the question regarding how relationships are impacted by accountability, Trudell saw accountability as significant to relationships in organizations.

I think if you think about having a team of people, if I as a leader say, Ok, I want to hold employee A accountable but I am not doing the same [with] B... If A employee and B are linked, I have to ask myself, have I got a compatible accountability with both employees? Because they have to work together, I am probably going to set up some healthy conflict if I don't hold them accountable in the same way... I see healthy relationships as significant to the success of person's A & B as well as the organization. If you have the ability to set up healthy relationships and an environment where people are willing to be accountable and others are fitting together in it, I believe is the basis for high performance teams. Without that analysis on the part of the leader, it can create conflict and sub-optimal performance. Leadership's main role is to decide what should be done, how to do it and when. If you think about it, we are architects.

I asked Trudell about the word “feedback” and her thoughts on the term. Her answer reflected her thinking on clarity of understanding by the individual person about what their accountability “is,” answering the question with a reference to fairness—one of two occurrences in all of the conversations.

I firmly believe one of my major responsibilities is to assure that my direct reports have timely and fair feedback that is based on fact instead of opinion. Without it, I do them and the organization a disservice.

In discussing responsibility, Trudell tied it back to the values of the organization. She started again with her own interpretation of what personal responsibility is. In doing so, she linked personal actions and responsibility to what happens in organizations that lack clarity about performance standards within the organization.

Acting responsibly is being an adult, being mature. It goes back to our value system that tells us, I hope, what is right or wrong. I also believe that organizations must have values that bring people to act responsibly. If you think about it, it sets up the organization for significant liability when you are basically saying to them: “Results at any cost.” The value system tells us how to act; without a good value system, people will meet their accountabilities but one has to be concerned how they meet them.

Trudell appears to be practicing “kind” or “nice” traditional accountability. She appears to care about her employees and their opportunity to perform, yet she talks about individual responsibility, holding A and B accountable to the same standards (because they work together) and the individual’s clear understanding of his or her personal role, the values of the organization and “acting responsibly is being an adult, being mature.” This is an indication of a belief that there are firm ways of doing things—people just need to be told what is expected and it will happen when they are “mature.” There appears to be a belief that “good” behavior is “right,”

and what is constructed as “bad” behavior is “wrong” and a problem—and that it is possible to distinguish clearly between the two.

At this point, I offered the description of constructive accountability that was included in questions sent to her earlier. (As with others, she had been requested not to study the questions or the description of CA but hold them as reference for the telephone conversation in order to ensure spontaneity in the conversation process.) I emphasized that what I call end accountability is not eliminated, but with constructive accountability the need for “end accountability” is de-emphasized and decreased. She was asked if she had questions regarding the description. She responded to the description as follows:

I agree with your definition. It is what I was talking about earlier. In organizations what you need to have is [what you call] “constructive accountability.” You have to have values and welcome others to partake in the organization together. What I find in an organization with a [good] value system, when the going gets rough, with constructive accountability fully understood and practiced, people will not be as afraid of accountability when they know that we will do what is right.

I sensed that she had looked at the description of CA prior to our conversation but I was encouraged to hear her take the term constructive accountability into her language. She continued her response by asking and answering the following question,

How do you make sure that happens? The organization needs to create an environment and an operating structure so [the organization members] understand there is interdependency. Encounters must be constructive instead of destructive. Sharing information and giving viewpoints must be possible. Focus on what are the right organizational goals that need to be achieved to make the organization successful. If you keep them there you have great encounters and they understand that what they can do helps others succeed. It works beautifully but it takes a strong leadership that indicates that people need to embrace accountability instead of being afraid of it. One clear aspect

that I have seen in terms of CA is when the leaders say, “That is not the way we want to do it so what can we do to work on it?” It removes blame and encourages people to be accountable.

She went on to address non-performance within a system.

If someone is constantly unable to meet their accountability, the first thing is that they couldn't be accountable if they tried or, second, there is a capability issue on the part of the individual. They just can't do it. In any event, you have to deal with the individual situation because it impacts others in the organization. The individual becomes a barrier to the work of others. Deming taught me more about accountability than just about all other parts of systems thinking. It is thinking about a system and how other people operate in it.

I asked her, “As a new view of accountability, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace?” She responded,

I think that it [already] happens in many organizations, but I think if the leadership was sensitized to [CA] and the power of this approach to accountability, they would be more willing to create that environment. It is working off each other's skills and strengths. I think that a group of people could buy into it, and if it [CA] is done in a healthy perspective, it would go on all the time and it would be celebrated by the leadership.

Throughout the conversation, Trudell emphasized the value system of the person and the value system of the organization. She said,

I have noted over the years that people come into organizations with their [own] value systems and you must talk to them about what the organizational values are, what trust is, that we expect you to live within these values, that we are valuing your competence. It is that teamwork is intellectual sharing, that is so powerful... it is collective intelligence. You have to teach them that there are other people around and to support them. Without it, you get negative organizations. The poor people underneath the leadership keep asking

why “they” [the leaders] are not being held accountable. Our full job is to remove those roadblocks to accountability. When you think about it, how often have you heard, I’m holding you accountable for something—but I never come down and include you in discussions. I don’t ask you your opinion or I fail to give you timely information because I am too busy. I fail to see the power in that. That is where an organization goes by the wayside. How often do you hear, [or don’t hear], “I really don’t know what you want me to do.”

In answering the question, “Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace; describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members,” she hesitated, then said the following...

If you were to go to other organizations and ask them their definition of accountability, you would get a variation of answers that are pretty profound. Basically, it is asking what is the environment in which we want to work and what are the success factors that we want to result from that environment. It takes leadership and employees willing to sit down and say, what is our definition of accountability and what do we want out of it? If people talk about it openly and understand that there is another way to approach it, perhaps they would be willing to listen.

It starts with seeing how powerful is the concept [of constructive accountability] and how can we apply it best for our own success. When an organization thinks about that, talks about it openly and considers what it takes to run their organization in ways that they have never thought about before, it creates all kinds of opportunities. People have to believe that you need others to get things done.

My sense is that Trudell’s perspectives are based on experience in working in environments where accountability is sometimes avoided for various reasons. She emphasized personal and organizational values and teamwork. Her reference to “working off each other’s skills and

strengths” is at the core of constructive accountability and how it works in organizations, whether recognized as CA or not. The following quotation, repeated from the conversation, notably uses the language “constructive accountability.”

To me, it is the difference between high performance and mediocre performance. It is asking, “What can I do to help you” or “Have we dealt with all the issues here?” In an environment where constructive accountability is embraced, people collectively take charge of what their mission is and they are not afraid to step out because they are collectively dealing with things... it is not saying “I didn’t get it done because I can’t get Fred over here to help.” It is taking on your own accountability for your contribution to the organization. You [as an organization member] can and must.

Although I see Trudell lingering in traditional accountability, Trudell’s statement reflects the generosity of working together through utilizing mutual strengths and relationships that make constructive accountability possible. Perhaps her openness to the conversation could make her learning and application curve shorter in moving accountability into a constructive context. There is energy in her that says that it could happen in Sea Ray and that perhaps it is already happening in some ways. The possibility that, as she suggested, “CA could be celebrated by leadership” is an enlivening thought!

2. The Federal Consulting Group: The Movement of Priorities of Accountability

The Federal Consulting Group (FCG) is part of the United States Department of Treasury, Washington, D.C. FCG is an internal consulting group focusing on leadership development, change management and education in various federal agencies. The FCG has been in existence 16 years, established in 1988 under Executive Order by the President of the United States. There was a strong interest at that time in bringing the quality management movement into the federal

government. It was called the Federal Quality Institute, eventually becoming The Federal Consulting Group.

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the USA put a strong emphasis on agency interaction within the federal government, heightening the need for the consulting group to bring people together in conversation. Much of the previous focus on continuous improvement and leadership capabilities has also continued since that time. Time appears “to be of the essence,” continuing pressure on the group to accelerate change.

The conversation was held with Lee Salmon, an Internal Executive Coach and Executive Consultant in The Federal Consulting Group. His focus, he says, is on leadership development and his main interest is in executive coaching. He also does facilitation, organizational change management and strategic planning work in different federal agencies. Salmon has been with FCG for three and a half years after working twelve years with the EPA in Washington, D.C.

The conversation with Salmon was held by telephone and lasted one hour. Salmon always seems pressed for time and routinely pre-schedules phone calls into his day so he can assign time as needed. He was more than willing to participate in the conversation but we had to schedule it a week ahead in order to fit it into his schedule. I had met him previously at a conference and had a couple of intervening conversations by telephone on other topics. Thus, the conversation flowed relatively freely. I was interested in his participation because of his work in governmental agencies. I wanted his thoughts on how accountability works in the governmental environment and felt it would contribute to the diversity of organizations represented in the thesis.

Salmon noted that much of FCG’s work is mandated. An example is accountability. Accountability, he said, “is addressed through the GPR (Government Performance Results Act of

1993). Congress wanted to tie performance to budget and bring about accountability to agency results. Which it should be.” When asked how accountability is currently perceived in most organizations, he stated that he sees it as being in

a negative frame. Something to be avoided, something painful, for both sides involved. It is duress. It is based on trying to place blame and how something has gone wrong. It misses the whole aspect of what has gone right and what we can learn that has gone so well and how we can see what has gone right and how it can work even better.

Salmon highlighted accountability as an aspect of organizations that he sees as significant. He said, “Accountability is important. The reality is that it is seldom done. I see very poor follow through on projects and activities in the different federal agencies in which I consult. There are great ideas but they are seldom followed through.” When asked about why follow through does not happen, he said,

It doesn’t happen because of changing priorities. The political dimensions of the job often dictate going from one initiative to another depending on the political winds at the time. Also, measurement and accountability are often lost sight of because you are trying to do program work with being understaffed and under funded. Since measurement and accountability take a lot more effort and take a longer-term focus, it gets dropped off the plate or done inconsistently.

I asked him how accountability is best performed in organizations. He started by focusing on managers and their direct reports. As with many other conversations, Salmon tied accountability to measurement and performance reviews (i.e., an after the fault approach). He said:

It works best when a manager and [his/her] direct reports each year in the performance appraisal process produce a contract. It has to be explicitly written as measurable requiring a performance element so the manager and the employee have a very detailed discussion of what that means. Within that discussion, there needs to be continuous

feedback and conversation about how things are going both ways between the manager and the employee. It should happen not just once or twice during the year but continuously. The manager then starts to play more of the role of coach, coaching for results, and helps the employee understand where [he or she is] doing well and helps them increase their performance in areas where they are not doing so well. They are teaching, through training, through a number of avenues that helps a person be successful.

With this statement, Salmon appears to be talking, without directly saying so, about what Culbert and Ullmen (2001) propose as a process of *two-sided accountability partnering* (see chapter 1). Such a process “cues people [the manager and subordinate] to consider a reciprocal obligation to help one another in the pursuit of company goals...” (p. 15). Within Culbert and Ullmen’s proposal of accountability there remains an emphasis on hierarchical relationships, placing the “boss” at the center of the relationship.

When asked about the word “feedback,” Salmon suggests that ongoing, continuous feedback regarding what is discussed in the reviews should occur, as well as the continuation of the leader performing as a coach. He continues,

[Feedback] is based upon a deep understanding of the strengths of each employee and how to build upon those strengths. It is not about beating somebody up because they haven’t performed. I would call this the “reality factor” that enters in, which is, do we have enough resources to do this project or achieve a certain result? Do we have the right mix of people that can be put on this effort, and do we have the senior management support and the political will to insure that the people that are doing the work have the support necessary to accomplish it? It is the reality factor because all of that has to play together to ask, can we reasonably accomplish this work? Not just the response of “make it happen no matter what,” but do we have the resources? You have to take that into account. Do we have the environment? Skill mix? Political support? Upper management support?

At this point, constructive accountability was described to Salmon and expanded on to emphasize the ongoing aspect of accountability being within normal day-to-day work. He was asked if he had questions regarding the concept. Perhaps initiated by the explanation, Salmon's language moved into using "organization development" language. He talked of strengths, coaching, "inquiry based," deficit thinking and values (those things people believe in most strongly). As the conversation progressed, he agreed that constructive accountability is currently happening in organizations, saying, "It already happens but it doesn't happen as much and as consistently as one would hope." He continued,

This creation process, this exchange process really taps into a fundamental belief that we all want to do our best and to use our talents in the best possible way. If you think the people are trying to scam the system, get away with as much as possible, getting only what they want, from that perspective this makes no sense. It is really a fundamental choice as to whether you want to see it and be part of it. It could help keep the morale in a corporation moving in a positive direction. *It helps change the victim thing.* Helps people live courageous productive lives, in community with others. It becomes life affirming and it breaks the cycle of people falling into the victim trap. (My emphasis added.)

Salmon's answer to the question, "Do you think this approach to accountability would be beneficial in organizations," is resonant with development in Appreciative Inquiry (a strength-based approach to inquiry designed by David Cooperrider and associates at Case Western Reserve in the 1980's) and it's social constructionist underpinning, emphasizing "the exchange process" that is fundamental to accountability that is constructive. He said,

I think it is possible [that this approach to accountability would be beneficial in organizations]. The exchange process provides an opportunity for people to step forward,

to learn and change behavior. Only they can change their behavior. No one else can change [his or her] behavior.

The final question offered to Salmon asked, "How do you think this concept could be taken into organizations?" His answer still seemed to lean toward performance appraisal, and, without saying so, to reflect his feelings of frustration with the politics and bureaucracy of government and how change happens in the context of governmental agencies.

I think you have to have some courageous leaders who have gotten this message themselves, understand what it is and what it means. It is the leaders' role to start the language and to completely reframe the performance appraisal process for it to be appreciative; they also have to build in more and more ways of recognizing people when they are doing right. It is not to say that we may not have to deal with the negative, but, hopefully, we can turn it around and use an appreciative process.

Salmon has a philosophy that appears not to be common to most government members. Something that he said late in the conversation supports this conclusion. He said,

If you believe the statement that we live in worlds that our questions create, then dialogue, which is really inquiry based, is always seeking clarification and deeper understanding of the image of the world, the results, if you will, of what we wish to create together. They become construction conversations.

He talked about "strengths," "appreciative feedback," and "reflective dialogue." Finally, I suggested to him that this language was common to Appreciative Inquiry. He then acknowledged a strong interest in this approach and that he has used it, with David Cooperrider, in an EPA agency in Washington, D.C. Another application in the same agency was forthcoming. The fact that many of his remarks were consistent with CA was now not so surprising. Yet there appears to be, for him, a continual struggle against the organizational

context of government priorities, the shifting winds of the political environment, and his desire to apply this philosophy of work. This paradox could also be present in his traditional approach to accountability. Thus, I think “getting your arms around accountability” in the governmental sector will call for an emphasis on relationships and the *ongoingness* of constructive conversations and relationships. Salmon’s comment that it would take courageous leaders is a significant statement.

As noted, Salmon emphasized the political aspects of working in a governmental atmosphere. As I listen to the news and hear the TV-talk about a new bill or a new initiative, I can hear the groans of the agency members in Washington as they wonder what is now in store for them. Will months of work be deserted because someone says there is a new priority? Salmon is also concerned about the leadership issues in the agencies. He said,

The reality is that most managers are put in there because of their technical, not management expertise. [They are] not focused on getting the best managers in this important role. You cannot expect the manager to be the subject matter expert. It has to be delegated to others so the manager can take on the real responsibility of coaching and developing the staff. Right now we try to make managers do too many things.

While Salmon leans toward an appreciative stance, his thinking on accountability seems to remain in traditional accountability based in “two-sided accountability partnering” (Culbert and Ullmen, chapter 1) This approach to accountability softens the leader’s approach while keeping the hierarchical aspects that continue to place the member at a disadvantage. Later in the conversation, after the introduction of CA, he warmed to the subject, but, without directly saying so, he suggested that he had doubts about CA. He said,

The question is whether the person has a positive attitude, a willingness to see how he or she may act in a more consistent and constructive manner that supports the whole organization and what has been set out to be accountable for.

3. TenderCare (MI), Inc.: Hierarchy and CA

TenderCare, a long-term nursing care organization, was founded in Michigan in 1990 when a group of investors bought out another company that was going out of business. It is located in Sault Ste. Marie, in the far northern part of Michigan, and has thirty-four facilities across the state. It is the largest nursing home company in the state. Long-term care is a highly service oriented industry. TenderCare has about 3400 employees with 3200+ patients on any given day. Whom you hire and how he or she treats the patients is a key determinant of success in this industry.

The long-term care industry is highly impacted by government regulations with less-than-sufficient government compensation. Therefore, strict budgeting issues are in place, often affecting the care of the patients and salaries at all levels. Unfortunately, low pay causes turnover, while lowering the skill level of those available to care for the patients. This is a constant concern for administrators in the local facilities and the corporate vulnerability for legal remuneration.

Paul Stavros, VP of Market Development and Community Relations for TenderCare, lives in a suburb of Detroit, MI. He, for the most part, works out of his home, driving to the various facilities and to the main office as needed. Stavros has experienced both “good” and “bad” organizational cultures. He worked at TenderCare, “a place where you feel part of a family,” for six years and then moved to Manor Care, the largest US long term care company, and a publicly held company based in Toledo, OH. Again, for the most part, he worked out of his home. After anticipating the opportunity for many years, he found the move disappointing. The company’s culture was punishing and unrelenting. After two years with Manor Care, he

was called by the president of TenderCare and invited to return to TenderCare in his current role. It was an easy decision to return and he has been happy he did. He has now been with the company for a total of eight years. When people leave, he said, they often come back. It just isn't the same in other companies.

When asked about what accountability is in most organizations, how it occurs routinely in most organizations, he hesitated, and then he offered a wide scope of accountability.

In most organizations... boy, that is a hard question. I guess, Jane, there [are] all levels of accountability... For instance, in healthcare in general, there is accountability to state, federal, local, to all those people. There is accountability to patients and to the families. There is accountability to your supervisors, your team workers, co-workers, and all those kinds of things. So, I guess, on a formal level, there is the hierarchy, there is the customer service aspect, and informally, there are the team members, co-workers and family members; there is the community and all of those kinds of things.

I then asked him, "How would accountability be done in most organizations today? How would it happen?" He continued talking about hierarchical relationships. He said,

In most cases it would again be through the hierarchy. If I needed to have something done... You have clearly defined responsibilities, the synonym for accountability, so if there is something that is not being done and it needs to be done, then either a supervisor or somebody along the chain of command is going to call and say, "This needs to be done, this is your responsibility and I am going to hold you accountable for this" and the person is either going to do it or they are not going to do it. Again, on the flip side of that, "Oh, my God, this is my job and I'd better get it done because sooner or later somebody is going to notice it isn't getting done." So I guess it is either an internal or externally motivated thing. I think more often it is the external motivation, the fear of retribution that makes people more accountable rather than the internal motivation to be the best you can be.

My next question referred to relationships, “Within the current interpretation of accountability, let’s talk about the relationships between people when someone is held accountable. How do you see that? Can relationships be improved through accountability?”

I think it depends. It is probably in the way it is handled. It is certainly possible for a supervisor to call and say, “You really dropped the ball, you screwed up, fix this or you are fired.” That is probably not a big relationship builder. But there is also, depending on how it is presented, if you look at it from another perspective, there is certainly the opportunity for a team member to say, “I see you are having problems, can I assist you with this and maybe together we can make this work.” Or, “It looks like you are struggling, let me tell you how I got it to work for me.”

When asked how each person generally perceives accountability, Stavros again responded with a chain-of-command answer. Relating back to the individual, he added,

I am accountable to my supervisor. They tell me what to do and I am responsible for doing it. If they reflected on it they [the bosses] would also agree that there is an informal level of accountability. But I think it is probably even more than that. Some people hold themselves more accountable than others. Some people say, “I am accountable to my boss.” Some people are accountable to [their] job, to the outcome, and those are probably the employees you want because they are more responsible for the overall outcome.

The definition of CA was offered to him, both in writing and verbally. When asked if he felt constructive accountability is already happening in organizations, that people are “being constructively accountable” but don’t know it, Stavros said,

I think without hesitation that there are organizations or pieces within organization [where this happens all the time]. I can take you to TenderCare nursing homes that certainly embody the constructive accountability concept. Generally, those centers would be considered to have their act together in all the other ways. They get the good [customer] surveys, have the good census, get the good revenue, and have the good

numbers, all those kinds of things. They are the ones we say have the appropriate corporate culture.

He noted that the word accountability has “a certain connotation.”

Certainly when you say the word accountability, you think of formal accountability, accountability after you have done something wrong, but I think you cannot undervalue the power of informal accountability or what you call constructive accountability.

It appeared that he had already constructed his own version of what CA means to him. As noted by some of his earlier comments, this was not a stretch for him. Regarding how organizations apply accountability, Stavros said,

To be honest with you, I am sure there are organizations [within TenderCare] that operate almost entirely on the end accountability mentality. And it is, “I’m the boss, do what I say or you will be fired.” It seems to depend almost entirely on the leadership, the senior management within that center and the culture that they set up.

Stavros seemed to lean toward Resource-Based Theory (noted in chapter one), saying, “What you are talking about is intuitively understood by some,” placing CA activities as highly subjective and, as a result, hard to duplicate. He gave an example of one center administrator who, in a meeting with other administrators who were arguing about why they should do certain things about census and revenue development, etc., said, “I don’t understand this conversation. I don’t understand why this doesn’t automatically happen in your buildings.” Stavros said,

In her building, it does happen and she does not have to go and say, you will do this and you will do that. The team just understands and they know what they are working towards. They truly want to be the center of choice. They are just doing it. They are all doing it, where [in other centers], it is really pulling them and pulling them. She just gets it.

I asked, "What impact do you think there would be if accountability was introduced as an interactive ongoing process of conversations and working well together?" He again suggested the intuitive aspect.

I think, Jane, what you are talking about doing is putting a framework around a concept that is intuitively understood and [there are] pieces of it out there. For example, we have a mentoring process. We know that if you take somebody with experience and put him or her with somebody new ... That, from what you are saying is kind of constructive accountability. And there are lots of things like that going on already.

I asked him, "Do you think it [CA] matters?"

There is no question that it matters. And there is no question that it is happening. And there is no question that it should happen more. The question is, how do you make it happen? And that is a hard one.

His response lead me into asking him, "How to you think CA could be taken into organizations?" he answered,

I think something like this is a leadership program, because, in its general sense, it embodies leadership, what it is, the whole thing... A leader is somebody who, through the power of their vision gets people to move in that direction. And constructive accountability fits more into that than end accountability does. You are holding conversations, you are articulating the vision, you are motivating, you are providing feedback, and you are getting everybody on the same page. They are talking to other people and they are moving toward that vision. Which is what leadership is.

At this point, I asked Stavros if he would like to add anything to the conversation. He said,

If you read the books on leadership, whatever terms they are using, leadership is creating a vision and getting people to move toward that vision. So, it is not the same as "management," which is more of [what you call] end accountability: I am the boss, you are the employee, you do this, I do this, that kind of thing. So, I think this applies to

leadership. You can package it whatever way you want; this is it. This is the whole crux [of leadership].

Stavros is enthusiastic about the people and the company. He is in an industry where long-term care facilities often have high turnover of minimum wage and professional (nursing) employees. It is hard work and it takes special leaders and care givers to be in this profession for any length of time. Under these circumstances, relationships either flourish or flounder.

Stavros talked of hierarchical levels. The levels of management within a care center would not be as deep as in many organizations. In this industry, the leaders in the care centers must work hand-in-hand with the employees. Leadership effectiveness is visible and noteworthy. In this case, it would be easy for the people to slip into the “you-tell me-what-to-do-and-I’ll-do-it” way of working. Or, it would be easy, according to Stavros, “for the ‘I’m the boss, do what I say or you will be fired’” mode of leadership. Stavros does not abandon hierarchy. He says that the organizational culture in a care centers depends almost entirely on the leadership: the senior management within a center quickly influences the culture.

While seeing hierarchy as useful, Stavros seemed to understand the interactive component of CA as beneficial and agrees that it is happening already in some of the TenderCare organizations. He also sees these practices as unrecognized and not currently notable. When I suggested that CA is already present in people’s everyday work, he said,

There are lots of things like that that are going on already. “Management-by-walking” around is the same thing. It is informally interacting. I think if you present it like that no one is going to say, you are crazy. They are going to say you are putting words to something we already know.

4. Sauder Woodworking Company: A Thumbs Up Company

Sauder Woodworking Company is a family-owned organization located in the small town of Archbold, Ohio. Sauder manufactures and imports furniture to be assembled by the purchasing consumer. The company was established in 1934 on the premise that individual creativity and contribution matters. Long before the recent emphasis on workplace spirituality became a focus of consultants and writers, Erie Sauder, grandfather of the current president, Kevin Sauder, took it, unnamed, as his model of working with others. He was propelled by a vision of two important principles: stewardship and servanthood. Early on he demonstrated his belief in serving God and his fellow man through his work. Sauder started with building chicken crates for local farmers, moved to building church furniture and eventually to using the scraps from the church furniture to build the occasional table-in-a-box to be assembled in the customer's home. He called it "knockdown furniture" (today's "ready to assemble").

In 1999, Kevin Sauder followed his grandfather and father in carrying forward Erie Sauder's beliefs. Kevin Sauder is determined to continue to lead the organization according to promises he made to his grandfather. According to Kevin, he promised his grandfather to continue to lead the company with the concepts of stewardship and servanthood and to practice integrity in all business dealings. He attributes much of Sauder's success to operationalizing Sauder's guiding principles. The business is built on everyone sharing core values that promote the following:

- Respect for all people.
- The right and need of each person to grow and learn.
- Serving the well being of others.
- Fairness, integrity, and openness in all we do.
- Stewardship and development of human and material resources.
- Work as an important component of a balanced quality of life.

- A community that seeks to include rather than exclude (Seiling, 1997, p. 238).

The person interviewed at Sauder was Tom Webster, VP of HR. Webster's background included a Master's degree in Organization Development. Prior to his current role at Sauder, Webster was the Manager of Organization Development. He feels the future of the company is solid. Sauder is having some of their furniture, although not those marketed under the Sauder name, manufactured internationally (China). He noted that, because of the role of the company in the local economy, taking all of the manufacturing out of the small town of Archbold would be very bad for the community. He stressed that the company is very aware of this and intends to stay. Sauder, as a company, holds it as an obligation to support the community in every financially feasible way. I commented about this being a "socially responsible viewpoint." His response was, "Well, whatever, we care about the community that our people come from."

Webster, in responding to the question regarding what accountability is in most organizations, said,

Accountability in most organizations is pretty much focused on what you do wrong...people are watching and they decide if I've done something right or wrong. If they are my bosses, they will tell me so and make sure I understand that I did it wrong. Sometimes it is kind of hard to take.

I asked him to tell me how accountability happens at Sauder. Although I did not get a direct answer to the question, Webster noted that Sauder is in an era where

we are more open to taking a look at lower level and higher level [status] accountability, not just for the functional areas but to challenge the status quo even in some other areas. But, nonetheless, we are opening up to looking at things in ways we have not done so before.

Webster feels that relationships are relaxed enough at Sauder that people are willing to share information. If they don't understand something they can ask questions and even challenge a process. Webster offered an example of how decisions are verified as acceptable in meetings.

We may ask for a straw poll or we can ask them to actually make a decision and see if we are all on the same page. Thumbs up means you are fully supportive of the decision. Sideways says it is ok but it is not exactly ok, but you will live with it. You are willing to go with it and support it. But if thumbs are down, there is something, some element that you just cannot live with. We find out what it is, we process that. If we have anyone sideways, then it can pass. We've got a consensus. Everyone is willing to go with us. But if there is one down, then we stop and we process it and find out what the issue is. *We are accountable.* We don't need to have it where someone has given it that consensus but really didn't believe. (Emphasis added.)

The "thumbs up, sideways or down" is, for me, an accountability process that, in some instances, may be less than constructive. To ask someone to be "thumbs down" in a group when others are supportive or can live with the decision after it has been discussed at length is to, under some circumstances, appear to be unreasonable or stubborn. It also signals the person must defend their stance strategically and "reasonably" when reasonableness may not be present—perhaps it is instinct, something that cannot easily be defended openly or factually. With the "thumbs up or down," there must be clarity that it is constructive and appreciated as appropriate to do so.

Accountability for Webster focuses on the individual. When explaining his viewpoint of accountability, he referred to himself. He said,

I am totally accountable for my behavior. I'm absolutely accountable. I cannot offload that on anybody else. So there are certain types of accountability that an individual does have one hundred percent and then there are certain types of decisions that need to be more of a group decision. (Emphasis added.)

In this response, Webster places accountability fully with the individual. He also noted above that there are times decisions must be made in the group. When talking about “thumbs up, sidewise and down,” he suggests mutual accountability when he says, “We are accountable.” In both cases, I see him talking about accountability after the act; this is traditional accountability.

After giving him the definition of constructive accountability and asking him if he had any questions, Webster stated the following:

I think it sounds like an influencing process. In fact, there are times in our decision making group that our stopgap measure, or next step, is let's all go back and talk to our direct reports. Let's find out what they think. We'll pull that back in, let's get a broader perspective. Let's have some focus groups. Let's go to the front line and ask people what they think.

He is suggesting that CA is something they are already doing. It is not new but an instance of an already existing pattern. At the same time, it is very much in the control of those at the upper level and checking back with others is a “stopgap measure,” not a routine activity of exchange that influences day-to-day activities as well as the decisioning process at all levels.

I asked him, “If people understood that they are many times already working this way, would it make CA more acceptable to them?”

I think what it might do is reduce the notion that some people are politicking in a negative way. They don't understand [politics] is a positive thing. [CA] may help some people to be a little more inclined to engage in dialogue outside of the [formal] discussions. It will help them feel good about it rather than questioning as to whether they are going behind people's backs or whatever. And so I think there could be a lot of positives that would come out of it. It is very straight forward, upfront: this is how we make decisions; this is how we want to process things. It is open season to have off-line conversations and collect more data and do more research through asking other people questions and what not.

Webster appears to be in agreement with Tetlock that there is a “political” aspect to accountability. He added, “I would classify [CA] as good human relations and good employee relations and maybe we are doing it in the management and executive arena.” I paid attention when he inserted the word “maybe.”

Attempting to move beyond his viewpoint of CA being “good employee relations,” I asked him the following question, “Do you think part of the process could be having good questions? Part of constructive accountability is that you have the opportunity to check, to ask questions, challenging or not, to work together, to appreciate each others contributions, to get other people to think about what has occurred and what can, should or might be done to address an issue.” His response brought in an element missing in the conversations, emotions.

There are two sides to this and one is the willingness to bring our emotions to the table and the other side is the willingness to accept the outcome, the consequences. From an HR perspective I might have a really strong certain course of action that we should take but the process calls for us to process. I have to be willing to recognize or see the world and the decision a little differently after hearing the dialogue regarding all the issues that are surrounding it. I have to be willing to give in. I have to be willing to let go.

His reference to “emotions” is important, especially when people are working together on issues about which they feel strongly. Emotions are certainly present when using constructive accountability. Being open and flexible while in conversation can be emotional. It is part of mutuality, working well together and utilizing our strengths in partnering together. His dialogue notes that there are emotions when we don’t get our way—that one must “be willing to give in” or “let go.” To not be willing to let go may indicate an all or nothing stance that jeopardizes relationships and the willingness to partner in accomplishment.

I asked Webster, “Do you see any value in what I am having these conversations about?”

He replied,

I do see value in this because I believe an understanding of this whole concept creates a freedom—it gets people more freedom. There is a point in an organization that you feel you are the [sole] decision maker. That can be a very lonely position to be in and with CA there is the notion that that does not have to be a lonely experience. You have the freedom to get other people involved in that decision and that can be a very powerful and releasing position. To get people to feel ok with that, and that is the way it should be, could be, or both, I think it could be very encouraging.

The final question I asked was, “How do you think this concept could be taken into organizations? How could it be introduced with the potential of becoming part of the culture?”

Webster’s answer was similar to others:

I can answer that right away.... through leadership training. And there are lots of types of leadership training and there will be other new ones. I can see this to be a topic among other topics about how do you provide leadership? When you get into the decision making side of leading and managing, this could become a fundamental part of that in terms of a module or whatever under decision making.

In the conversation, Webster used language like emotion, community well being, flexibility and ethics, and an indirect reference to Sauder’s core values. Several years ago, when I was researching for another book, I talked to another Sauder organization member. Webster’s pride in the company that I saw during this conversation was reflected then, in 2000, when it was said that “Sauder Woodworking members know the company is not perfect; however, everyone is continually working to improve and, at the end of the day, to be able to say: ‘We did the best job we could today’” (Seiling, 2001, p. 238).

Webster sees accountability as individually based; that “I am totally responsible and it cannot be passed to anyone else,” and an influencing activity. He also brought in the need to “bring our emotions to the table and [that] the other side is the willingness to accept the outcomes, the consequences.” For me, Webster’s classification of CA as “good human relations” and “good employee relations” by leaders adds to the functional aspect of the practice of CA, yet it places CA in the realm of doing-it-when-you-want-to-be-nice, not an ongoing process of work-related interaction that makes sensemaking possible. In my view, CA is deeper than “good employee relations,” although good employee relations are certainly important to the process.

5. Procter and Gamble: Historical Significance with Secrecy

Procter and Gamble (P&G), Cincinnati, OH, a company that dominates the soap and detergent industry and markets other household and personal care products, has historical significance in management theory. “P&G,” started in 1837, was founded on deeply ingrained core values transferred to generation after generation of P&G people. Into the 90’s, it preserved its core ideology, according to Collins and Porras (1994), “through extensive use of [formal and informal] indoctrination, tightness of fit, and elitism” (p. 131). In 1984, Levering, Moskowitz and Katz, in *The 100 Best Companies to Work for in America*, said,

When you join P&G, you become part of a very disciplined organization that nurtures its people, moving them up from one rung to another. This is a company that lives and dies by performance. And just as the movement of brands is measured carefully, so is the movement of personnel (p. 277).

During the 1980’s there was great hoopla about P&G work practices focused around P&G Plant in Lima, Ohio. They were one of the first to take employee participation to a new level. Many

articles were written regarding their methodologies. In the 90's, they stopped opening their doors wide to interviews and consultants after, for example, a writer wrote an account in a book researching various "visionary companies" saying that P&G (and others) had "cult-like" environments. The observation was clearly not only about P&G but the description went against the thinking of P&G—especially after things started changing in the 1990's. These occurrences may have reinforced the company's intense penchant for secrecy and control of information. Contributing to the secrecy, the leaders envision their management practices as a competitive advantage (an example of RBV theory, in chapter 1) and are pained, for example, by the amount of transparency that occurs with the publication of accounts such as was included in the now classic book by Collins and Porras, *Built to last*, 1994, and another by Denison, *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness*, 1990.

Robin Elston wore a lot of different hats at Procter and Gamble in Lima, OH. Professionally, she was trained as a chemical engineer, expanding that with a business degree. She was hired as a chemical engineer, and served as OD Manager, Division Strategy Manager, Plant Environmental Manager, and then moved into operations management as Packing Department Manager, a big money department for the company. Her last three years at P&G she was an internal consultant supporting the development of plant strategy and coaching plant leadership to improve results and productivity. She was with Procter and Gamble at various plants for fifteen years.

When she left Procter and Gamble, Elston became an active consultant, working on her own and living with her family on a lake in a small town in Ohio. I asked her to focus on her internal work at Procter and Gamble and she agreed. She said she has fond memories of "P&G" and is very grateful to them for helping her hone her craft as an internal consultant. She said she

learned a lot and, although there were times when things were difficult, she was for the most part happy at P&G, “You just had to go with the flow.”

Elston verified that things had changed at P&G in the mid 90s. When asked at the beginning of the conversation about the history of the company, she said,

When I first started working there in the 80's they said, “people are our asset.” They spent a lot of money educating, coaching, etc. Then about the mid 90's everything shifted when we got a new CEO. It became more about getting the work done, cutting costs, competing. It was a real shift in the culture. The CEOs weren't from the outside but things still shifted. We had several CEOs and we thought some of them would go back, that things would be different but they stayed the course. Then [another CEO] took over in 2000 and he said, “We need to give the customer the best value,” but what he was really about was cutting costs. The culture never swung back to valuing the people. The training budget was cut back. People had been hired, they thought, into something different and they felt betrayed. Before, people had been expected to spend a certain amount of time in training and development and that never changed back.

I turned the conversation to accountability, asking the question, “How do you think organization members perceive accountability in most organizations today?” Elston focused on Procter and Gamble. She gave a lengthy answer saying,

Prior to the mid 90's, leadership [at Procter and Gamble] really tried to work with the employees as partners, coached them along, allowed them to make mistakes. They were there to help if mistakes were made. Then in the 90's it became more about mechanizing systems so the employees just had to follow the process. It was called the “current best approaches” or CBAs. The leadership would then monitor the employees to make sure the CBA's were followed. In theory it was taking the “art form” out of running the equipment. The problem was that it stripped people of their ownership of the task. It was “here is the 25-step process.” The people don't really learn how to do it so it strips the ownership out of it. They get so they just do it and don't really know how to do it. You would think that that process would work great, that there would be less mistakes,

more commonality in how things would be done, but it really instead introduced a lot of variation because I think they lost pride in their work.

When asked about her thoughts on accountability, Elston tied it to knowledge of the goals of the company.

I think that in most organizations, the people doing the work don't even know what the goals are. They don't even know what the long-term plan is. All they know is that they are supposed to show up, do this job and don't see how it fits into the bigger picture or plan. And I think that whenever that happens, leaders and managers are not able to get the follow through and accountability is a witchhunt. It is absolutely a benefit to have them understand the bigger plan and the goals all the way down through the organization. And then they know what they have to do to participate.

I asked Elson how people were held accountable, specifically in P&G, when she was there. She said,

If something went wrong there would be an investigation. We called it a "multi-cause analysis," trying to get it down to the basic cause and trying to correct that root cause to get it out of the CBA's so it wouldn't happen again. It often felt like a witch-hunt. Sometimes there was truly an operator error made and everyone would cover for each other and you wouldn't get things done. I think there was really less accountability after things changed. I worked in the plant for six years and I think very few people were disciplined, a few got fired. There was really loose accountability. It was very odd when about half the people were giving their all.

Accordingly, much of the hunting for problems and analysis was done half-heartedly; they were just going through the motions.

A lot of [the issues] were really about poor leadership. Often a new program would be rolled out from Division in Cincinnati and certain timing and phases had to happen. The leaders would be truly just going through the motions because they really weren't

participating in it in the plant. With a poor accountability system you couldn't get people to buy in. Often leadership at that plant wouldn't be bought into it so they would be telling people to do something they didn't believe in themselves. How can you hold other people accountable for that?

I asked a question about responsibility as it is in today's organizations. I said, "Acting responsibly is a significant element in accountability. Tell me your thoughts on the status of responsibility in organizations today."

I think in many organizations today employees are treated more like juveniles than adults. They are told what to do and how to do it, and if they disagree they are to do it anyway. Much like a juvenile. Sometimes it becomes more what I can get away with and, if I don't agree, what is the least amount I can do and stay under the radar. It is like game playing. Today, it is more like they are herded; they are not given the information they need. They then act irresponsibly, much like adolescent behavior.

At this point, I turned the conversation to constructive accountability. We went over the description and exchanged information. When asked what impact she thought CA could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace when working together, she said,

You know, I think that is very interesting. In thinking about it, I think it would increase the focus on relationships. They would ask somebody to do something and then they would be committed to it. Then that person can go to the next level and trickle it down. It is transformational because it is not upper management giving edicts. At first glance it would seem like it would take more time but working with people this way helps you to get buy-in instead of having to railroad it through.

Sensing that she was focusing on leaders in her response, I re-offered the thought that CA could be part of the way of working at all levels, across peer relationships, across groups, in any process of getting work done, seeking information, etc. I reemphasized that it could be an

“ongoing process of relating in casual conversations, in meetings, across the table at lunch, etc.”

Elston responded,

I guess this is the beauty of it...and I see what you mean, that it is not limited to the leadership level, that it is in everybody's work. I guess taking it to the next level and then the next level is the real challenge. Maybe 'trickle it down' isn't enough.

The next question in the conversation was, “Do you think this approach to accountability would be beneficial in organizations?” She said,

Constructive accountability seems very reasonable to me. I think it is there at some level now. Now I think that if you were starting a new plant from scratch, it would be good. Yet, some people would really come into that plant already cynical.

The final question was regarding if and how this concept could be taken into organizations. She was quick to answer and enthusiastic.

I'm also wondering if an organization already exists and then people are introduced to this concept, how do you bring people out of that? It definitely can. I think it has to be learned experientially, and I think that people would have to go through some type of training that would be a significant emotional event. They would have to look back at how they got the way they are, when it worked and when it didn't, how good they are at building relationships, and then, after the training, they would have to have to do their own research and fieldwork in changing their habits. That would take a while. But they could come out the other side. Some people have the ability to do that, and some people would really care about it.

It was apparent throughout the conversation that Elston was disappointed in the changes at P&G, and she felt the company had turned away from a way of working that she valued. She values organizations that see their people as “assets” and treats them as such. This was demonstrated in the following statement.

Prior to the organizational shift the [managers] who excelled were the ones who put the time into developing, coaching and investing in their people and went for long term development. After the change the leaders were more charismatic and getting people to work more overtime, get out the product. More like treating the people like the traditional factory workers. But even though the language was very much about valuing people, working together, getting everybody involved, that's not the way it felt.

Elston's approach to accountability remains in the individualized stance, although she appears to be a relational person. Yet, she was intrigued with constructive accountability and the mutuality of the process. She saw it as a benefit to relationships. She also saw obstacles to being able to bring it into existing organizations, suggesting that it would be easier in new organizations. It seems ironic that working in a previously highly touted organization that brought to the forefront managerial, team and participatory processes that were "before their time" brought Elston to turn down an opportunity to advance in the organization. She was disappointed. When asked if she felt P&G would value the concept of constructive accountability, she said she had her doubts. Regretfully, the company is too far away from the innovative times of the 80's and early 90's to turn back.

6. Yoder Brothers Inc.: The Clearly Defined Accountability Equation

Yoder is a highly scientific and sophisticated horticultural enterprise, which, it is said, "created the floriculture industry." Yoder Brothers is located in Barberton, OH, the original location of the company established 80 years ago by two brothers who raised and sold flowers. The company has grown to be a world leader in flowering research and breeding, holding many patents and processes for developing horticulture. Early on, they pushed for registration of new flowers, eventually leading to the patenting of flowers in the US. While chrysanthemums remain Yoder Brothers' largest crop, the company has added the development and production of azaleas,

hibiscus, poinsettias, impatiens, pot roses, dahlias, asters and annuals. The Yoder Canada division specializes in finished mums, Fleurettes, azaleas, poinsettias, Easter lilies, Persian violets and other flowering plants, including perennials. According to their website, the company of 1600 people “still retains a family spirit and a family sense of values remarkable for a company of any size.”

Through the years, Yoder Brothers production facilities have moved away from Barberton and moved to other locations in the US and abroad. The last Barberton greenhouse closed in 1978. However, the company, it is said, remains close to its roots by establishing its worldwide corporate headquarters in a former dairy barn on the Barber Estate.

Tom Dagues is recently retired and the former VP of American Operations at Yoder Brothers. Dagues had invited me to his home, and while welcoming, seemed in the beginning restrained. In some ways, his manner was reminiscent of many of the managers I had worked for in the past—a little withdrawn, a little reserved. As we got into the conversation, he became more relaxed and open.

Dagues started as a “generalist” in the Human Resources Department at Yoders, eventually working for the company for twenty-three years. He called himself “the go-to guy.” There were many changes over the years at Yoders brought on by technology and advanced capabilities for transporting fragile flowers over long distances. The availability of cut flowers from the international market virtually eliminated the domestic market for cut flowers. Floriculture, according Dagues, is a highly vulnerable industry. Flowers such as chrysanthemums are highly open to disease. A whole crop can be wiped out quickly and it appears not to be an unusual event. This makes being in the business and sustaining your place

in it very precarious—and the role of an organizational leader highly relevant to everyday practice. When asked about accountability in organizations normally looks like, he responded:

The managers I talk to have a hard time with this thing. Accountability requires trust and they aren't willing to do that. Accountability for many people is code for punishment. Accountability just means the invited relationship with the superior. But it has nothing to do with the school of thought about what is enough accountability; what is appropriate accountability. The purpose and role of the leader is to help everyone else be accountable. Relationships. In the old school of accountability, the relationship is defined by titles. Job descriptions are written about relationships in the same way. Performance appraisers perform appraisals of specific goals and their behaviors and establish goals for another period of time. The whole process is about control, which is all it is about.

I asked Dagues specifically what were relationships are in the old form of accountability. His answer related to the organizational chart and how managers develop people and themselves as managers.

Relationships in the accountability equation are clearly defined. There is an organization chart, roles, titles. [Relationships] are always developing. The issue with the manager is, how do you continue to develop the relationship in a way that enhances the organization? It works both ways. I [as the leader] develop through that process. You talk to a lot of managers, they don't see personal development. Development is training, going out going to a class. The manager says you will go to this seminar because the knowledge will be good for you and good for the organization. In real personal development, the manager is constantly saying to himself, everyone here can teach me something today. Development for the manager includes listening, you learn quite a bit. I learned a lot but it didn't make me necessarily effective (laughter).

A good bit of the conversation with Dagues hovered around the negatives of being a controlling leader. He brightened up when he brought up the enlightened leader. He had noted that much management is about protection, with relationships becoming adversarial by design. He added,

Enlightened [leadership] is nothing about protecting yourself, because if an employee fails...sure many employees fail because they are not the right person for the job, or, of course, there are some seriously bad people out there. But that is not the place to start. Everyone has the capability, you have selected [him or her] for the job, they've got the capability. So there is one possible failure point that needs to be avoided: The manager did not help him enough. My job is to continually make investments in you. It is through your performance that the organization survives.

Asked about the daily activities involved in the relationships he had mentioned earlier, Dagues replied,

In the old school, daily, there is very little interaction. It is formal. It is always with the idea that it is preparatory to some disciplinary action, making documentation. HR people are notorious for this. You document, document, document because some day the ultimate discipline will have to occur and when that happens you have to be protected. So, relationships become adversarial, by design.

Let's talk a little more about the enlightened manager in daily accountability. How does it work for them?

Oh, it is open. The values of the organization are clearly understood and it continues in both directions. In the case of the enlightened manager, relationships are improved through this daily exchange but there are times when it is definitely depleted. There are some that say there is an emotional bank account where you are making deposits and taking withdrawal. That even smacks of old school thinking, that there is an equation and it is a zero sum game.

Let's look at the word "feedback." Give me your thinking on the language, the word feedback.

Feedback is a concept. If it is done well and it is thought through, it is effective. Feedback describes a type of communication. I was enamored with it once, heading up a task team at Yoders. It had to do with [the team]. Whether they receive it or not is a different story. Most managers are notorious when it comes to feedback. So many of them [assume people] already know what needs to be known. Unfortunately, most people can only see the world through their own eyes. They have a lot of preconceived notions.

At this point, I read Dagues the definition of constructive accountability and then offered it to him to read. Then I asked him if he had any questions, he said,

Constructive accountability sounds to me like a cultural issue. Accountability has such bad connotations. It is associated with punishment. When you mention the word accountability the look on their face is, uh, oh. And the next discussion is about authority. The smart ones will say, wait a minute, you can't hold me responsible for something I do not have authority for. No one has full control. When you talk about accountability for outcomes, I own the process; I am instrumental to the outcomes. When it is shared, which it usually is, then there is shared authority, shared accountability.

Though talking of "shared accountability," his statement seemed to tie accountability into the individualized realm. He talked of "I own the process; I am instrumental to the outcomes." So I added the following, trying to make more clear the "ongoing" and "exchange" process. I said,

In some ways, it is a new form of accountability but since accountability is currently interpreted, understood and defined as, "I've done something wrong and now I have to pay a price for it," or "I have done something right and I am going to be rewarded," there are limitations as to how constructive it can be. If people have an understanding that accountability, when constructive, is an ongoing thing and the best way to be accountable is to take a proactive stance in bringing others into doing what I need to do to get the job done, to work with others...

Dagues interrupted, turning the discussion to issues of staying committed,

I go to commitment. We went through an exercise years ago about values and what does the organization say their values are as opposed to the ones that are really in place. One of them that we talked about was integrity. We defined it as *Honor thy commitment*. Then the discussion about commitment goes into accountability. What are you accountable for? Personally, you need to be accountable for honoring your commitment. Don't make a commitment you can't honor. That is where you start. If the culture sees it that way, the managers and the team see it that way. Then the discussion is: Are these the right things to commit to? Are you comfortable to committing to this process? What you see in old-line thinking is, you are not committing, I am committing you. I am telling you what to honor. You aren't even being asked to commit. You are being told to commit. Now, it is the other way around for the servant manager: I am committing myself to help you. I have to be comfortable with that and you have to be comfortable with that.

I then asked Dagues, "Do you think the CA approach to accountability would be beneficial in organizations?" His response was somewhat of a surprise: he recognized CA as a movement forward and that people would not see it as accountability. He even recognized the relational side of CA. He responded,

I can think of a number of people who need [CA]. The people who wrestle with the issue of accountability, not knowing that it [now] starts with that paradigm of punishment--that it is find and punish and done after something has gone wrong. Accountability is not being nicer...doing the wrong thing in the right way. And they do not understand the relationship side.

I asked the final question in the conversation, "How do you think this concept could be taken into organizations," and Dagues had to stop and think a moment.

Introducing CA into an organization...it is a culture thing. Almost every organizational thing I've ever read or heard about says that if you don't have commitment, change does not happen. That says something about lots of change [efforts]. You have to, I think,

enroll those in the middle. You are not getting any grassroots movements...you are not getting any groundswells. It has to be a micro organization, within a certain area, I think. In other words, the leader has to say, "I'm going to go ahead and let them do it. I'm not going to get in the way." You have to try to cascade it into an organization. Use tools such as the 360 and so on.

Dagues offered a clear description of "old school" accountability, suggesting its purpose is inevitable to discipline. This carries traces of agency theory where people are assumed to be working for self-interest and extrinsic rewards. Such an assumption justifies the need to control subordinates. According to Dagues, traditional accountability is formal and to be documented because, as the leader, you have to be protected. He admires the enlightened leader and servant leadership. Dagues joined other conversations in putting an individual and linear bent on accountability.

6. CSIR (Pretoria, South Africa): Using Research and Development to Bring Change

CSIR is a large South African scientific research and development company originally established in 1945. The CSIR acronym is now used instead of the old title: Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. CSIR remains the country's top technology and innovation agency and is the largest research and development (R&D) organisation in Africa. It accounts for about 10% of the entire South African R&D budget. A staff of approximately 3000 includes some of the top technical and scientific minds in the country, collaborating in multi-disciplinary teams, to put forward solutions of the highest standard in innovation and excellence.

The CSIR is a "para-statal" organization, a non-government organization that is partially funded by the state. The balance of the funding comes from contract research (most of which is applied research) and consulting. It was emphasized that the CSIR is committed to supporting

innovation in South Africa to improve national competitiveness in the global economy. Their role is to provide technology services and solutions in support of various stakeholders. Opportunities are identified to develop and exploit new technologies in the private and public sector.

Two people from CSIR participated in conversations on accountability. Johann Roux, Ph.D., as noted earlier, participated in the conversations in my place. The participants were Mario Marais and Isabel Meyer located in Pretoria, the capital of South Africa.

Mario Marais has been at CSIR since 1983. His title is Senior Project Manager. In the wider sense his role is mainly to “scope projects that will impact the thinking of government regarding their role in improving the logistics and supply chain management environment in SA.” He notes that this is done via applied research, analysis and consulting. Marais said, “I want to add value through creative thinking. Stimulating the development of innovative approaches to problems is my interest.”

In response to the question, “How do you think accountability is perceived in most organizations today by the organization’s members? And, why?” he said,

[It is seen] as a burden that is imposed upon you, [as] a rule of the game. Personal accountability is not encouraged by the way we manage people – we assume non-accountability in subtle ways, e.g. by the processes we set up.

Next, he was asked, “How is accountability utilized/activated in most organizations of today? Describe how effective you think most of these efforts are.”

Legal accountability is formalized and tied to management positions. Accountability is formally invoked when there is trouble. This is not effective. The tendency is to try to attribute blame. Managers are the only people that are deemed accountable, thus having a negative effect on other people’s self-esteem. I think that people talk more about

responsibility rather than accountability. Accountability is mostly seen as either a personal characteristic or as being attached to a job.

Turning to relationships, he was asked, “Within the current interpretation of how accountability happens, are relationships between the participants for the most part improved or depleted following an accountability encounter and why?”

Relationships are depleted, mostly. Blame seems to be attributed as an accountability encounter. [When this happens] a sense of personal failure develops.

In discussing the word “feedback,” Marais said,

Feedback is an act of accountability, but can end up as a blaming session or seen as criticism. Feedback should rather be seen as part of an ongoing dialogue and not as formal “events” that are painful to all.

Acting responsibly is an element of constructive accountability. Tell me your thoughts on the status of personal responsibility in organizations today. Why is it this way?

It is assumed, but not nurtured. People get assigned a job and then their manager looks over their shoulders too much, or actually interferes with the actual job.

At this point, he was offered the description of constructive accountability and a short discussion followed. He responded with the following.

[CA] should take the strain out of talking about accountability and build better understanding of how people think about accountability. People may be encouraged to ask for help earlier if accountability is not “such a big deal,” but is part-and-parcel of how we work together.

It is thought that CA, as an exchange process, supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes. Do you agree that an ongoing process of CA could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how? And, if not, why not?

Skill in relating to each other and being able to tackle difficult issues will improve as people practice. [With CA,] I think that hierarchical attitudes can be modified.

Marais' answer was curiously familiar regarding top-down accountability but yet different from other conversations when he was asked, "How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of the organization?" He responded,

Accountability should not be seen as a top-down flow, but a bi-directional thing. How are you as a manager, accountable to me as your "underling?" How are we jointly accountable? You should analyze and spell out the current rules of the game and talk about how these rules work and don't work. Develop a team approach – we are in this together. Ask people what do they think that they can and [what do they] want to be accountable for. Then discuss the constraints in the workplace that disables accountable behaviour. This includes the way we treat each other.

When asked about how constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace, he said,

We need to talk about all the hidden assumptions about accountability. We need to discuss interdependency and how it plays out in the workplace organizationally.

Although I did not personally meet with Marais, I sense a synergy of thinking here that was not apparent in some of the other conversations. He appears to understand the concept of moving accountability into one's daily work. He also emphasizes the need to talk across groups and that leaders are also accountable to their "underlings" (a word I find uncomfortable). In this vein, he called for a "bi-directional" flow instead of a top-down flow. He also talked of addressing

hidden assumptions about accountability as a tool for moving toward the new understandings of accountability as constructive. This is key to raising awareness and nurturing the ongoingness of constructive accountability.

Isabel Meyer is a Senior Project Manager at CSIR. She has been with CSIR fourteen years. Her relationship with Mario Marais is as a colleague sharing the same title and generally the same responsibilities. Her formal training is in Applied Mathematics, Statistics and Operations Research as well as Business Management. Her role and responsibilities in the company reflects the focus of the organization in general. Her own focus and interest is, as she said, "The development of innovative solutions to client problems in the field of logistics and decision support." When asked, "Why is this important to her," she said, "It allows creativity." Within her role, she is responsible for the conceptualisation of solutions for client problems, proposal definition, development of detailed solutions, project coordination, reporting, and feedback and mentoring. In general, this reflects a very linear focus on project management and coordination within CSIR. Again, Dr. Roux participated in the conversation in my place.

When asked, "How is accountability perceived in most organizations and why," Meyer related it to the "maturity" of organizations. She said,

It depends on the nature and maturity of the organization. Accountability is probably perceived relative to the goals of the organization and the individual within the organization. In less mature organizations, this is around making a profit. In more mature organizations, social and environmental accountability is included. At the member level, accountability is probably reduced to what is defined as the outcome of the individual's role in the organization (especially in larger, hierarchical, less advanced organizations).

A Taylorist division of work is still very much in place in many larger organizations, which makes it easy for individuals to delegate accountability "upwards"

within a hierarchical organizational structure, and then to only assume responsibility in terms of the key outcomes of the individual's role.

Next, she was asked, "How is accountability utilized/activated in most organizations of today? How are people held accountable specifically in your organization?"

[Accountability] is probably defined through the key performance areas or objectives that are defined for specific jobs within the organization, and activated if such objectives are not achieved. The "penalties" for not achieving what a job entails (i.e., not doing what you are accountable for) then translates into financial penalties (reflected in reduced or no salary increments and bonuses).

Meyer noted differences in how people are held accountable at different levels when responding to the question of "how are people held accountable in your organization?" Her response was related to the above response.

An interesting phenomenon exists in which people at lower levels (where job outcomes are easier to define and hence "police") are more easily held accountable than at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, where the "good" or "bad" of performance can be argued in various directions. For example, a management team at the business unit level can manage a unit (typically 200 – 300 people) in such a way that the unit does not make critical targets, and that people hence need to be declared redundant. In this situation, the redundancies almost always influence people at lower levels in the hierarchy (i.e., lower than business unit management team level). The management team is hardly ever held accountable for the consistent lack of good management practice that leads to the situation in the first place.

Meyer was asked about her thinking on whether relationships between the participants for the most part improved or depleted following an accountability encounter.

Relationships are mostly depleted. The encounter is typically focused on “punishing” for behaviour that is not what it should be, rather than on defining remedial actions and investing in and skilling the employee to prevent the recurrence of the situation.

When asked for her thoughts on “feedback,” Meyer’s response was very informative. She mentioned timing. She said,

Assuming that organizations are “accountable” for developing the human capital that they employ, feedback forms a critical part of this development process and is hence an act of accountability. However, too often feedback takes place at intervals that are too long, and feedback is more often than not “after the fact,” meaning that it does not enable preventative action. Also, “feedback” is something that is given in a top-down fashion to improve the performance of the underlings. If organizations are considered to be “accountable” for the development of all employees (including management), feedback should also be given in a bottom-up (360-degree) fashion, hence enabling management performance to also be improved.

Meyer was given the description of constructive accountability and it was discussed briefly. She was then asked, “As a new view of accountability, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace?” To my thinking, her following comment that CA provides a process for “continually questioning and updating their own assumptions” is a significant statement regarding CA.

A continuous mindset of reviewing what people are doing in the context and within the set of objectives that they are doing it will immediately create a shared sense of purpose, and hence a more dynamic, faster moving and more responsive organization. In terms of interaction, it will deepen the quality of exchanges between people and provide a platform within which individuals are continually learning from each other and continually questioning and updating their own assumptions as to what is right, wrong and appropriate in the context of what the organization as a whole is attempting to achieve.

She was asked how organizations could improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of their organization. She, as did others, mentioned the environment of the organization.

[You do it] by creating a managerial environment in which participation rather than hierarchical control is the norm and by creating a social context in which a clearly communicated set of values drives behaviour, rather than an environment in which people compete for self gain at all costs.

Meyer noted that CA could positively impact skills and attitudes saying,

The immediate feedback component of CA will lead to a continuous process of appropriate skills development (just-in-time skills rather than just-in-case skills). This will reinforce a process of positive work experience, in which people are appropriately skilled, when required. The continuous exchange of information and innovative ideas will similarly lead to employees that are more appropriately “able” to deal with their tasks, which will positively impact job satisfaction. Preventative rather than after the fact feedback will improve the success of individuals as well as the organizational system, which will in turn improve job satisfaction.

When asked about how constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace and to describe what might be needed in leading or training and development of organizational members around constructive accountability, she first focused on new ways of leading and then on training and development. She said,

Organisations will require leaders that inspire appropriate performance rather than managers that try and enforce it. [This means] people need to be led to interact according to an agreed set of values, rather than an enforced set of rules. Participatory processes and styles of management will need to be in place to assist in building the necessary trust, ownership and commitment that is required as a baseline for constructive accountability. Organisational

structures will need to reflect the change towards participatory management styles and decision-making processes.

Meyer was one of three participants to bring up emotions in the conversations. She did it through a reference to emotional maturity in response to an inquiry regarding training and development and CA. (EQ = emotional quotient; IQ = intellectual quotient, as referred to by Goleman, 1995.)

There is a need for training and development that is in time for the situation in which it needs to be utilized. This includes a focus on the development of skills that relate to “emotional maturity” and interpersonal efficiency rather than technical skills (EQ as well as IQ). Reward systems will need to reinforce behaviour that supports a climate of constructive accountability (continuous learning, information sharing, and the innovative exchange of ideas).

Marais and Meyer seemed to resonate with the concept of constructive accountability. Meyer mentioned the connection between the current accountability practices and Taylorism from the early 20th century. Noting the significance of its presence in larger organizations, she sees it as easy for individuals to delegate accountability “upwards” within a hierarchical organisational structure.

Of significance was Meyer’s reference to the differences in how people are held accountable at different levels in organizations, suggesting it is possibly because it is “easier to define and hence ‘police’” those in the lower ranks than those at higher levels in the organizational. Perhaps it is because Marais’ and Meyer’s role is to consult in organizations across South Africa, but they also seemed to be sensitive to the need for both soft skills and hard skills. They have a highly complex mandate in sourcing and developing knowledge and

technology “in the context of our country’s national priorities and global challenges.” Of those challenges, sustainable economic growth is essential to the South African economy and is especially difficult when faced with the history of apartheid in South Africa. The current level of unemployment is at 40% across the country and at 60% in some cities such as Johannesburg. (South Africa's web site calls this the "expanded unemployment" rate, which includes people who are neither working nor actively seeking work. The statistic that corresponds most closely to our unemployment rate is about 30%.) This places the work of CSIR in the forefront of the development venue in the country.

In South Africa hope does exist, and there certainly is an eagerness to learn about ways to make improvements in dealing with the complex issues they confront. I see many organizations in South Africa as seeing the need to move toward becoming more equitable and socially integrative. In fact, there is a strong realization that they must move forward or they will be faced with the harsh realities that other countries on their continent (and others) are experiencing at this time. Marais and Meyer both seemed highly positive regarding the potential of constructive accountability as part of leading a movement toward change instead of enforcing a set of rules, a strategy Meyer sees as essential to inspire effective performance.

8. StarTek: Working in a Positive Direction

StarTek is an international call center services organization based in Bloomfield, CO. It has a global presence in four countries and 21 locations. The home office of StarTek is located in Cherry Creek, CO, a suburb of Denver. StarTek is a facilities-based provider of communications services, including voice, data and Internet access. Founded as a corporation in 1987 as Starpak, a small product packaging and fulfillment company. They eventually moved into marketing

telecommunications services to ethnic businesses, residential communities located in major metropolitan areas, international long distance carriers and Internet service providers transacting with the world's emerging economies. The company's growth has been exceptional. Increases in year-over-year sales have been significant. StarTek added three new facilities every year up to 2003 when they opened four new sites.

Mike Burns is the VP of HR at StarTek and previously had the same role with Hunter Douglas WFD, another organization with members participating in the study. Although I had previously talked with Burns when writing an earlier book, the present conversation was initiated through Amanda Trosten-Bloom. Amanda was the consultant involved with a previous Appreciative Inquiry process (a process also mentioned previously by Salmon at the Federal Consulting Group) while Burns was at Hunter Douglas. Burns mentioned Appreciative Inquiry from time to time and mentioned "working in a positive direction" when talking about taking CA into the organization.

At Hunter Douglas, Burns was responsible for the HR functions, employment/employee retention, compensation, union avoidance, employee development and training, organization development, strategic planning and resource planning. He left Hunter Douglas in March of 2002, looking for a more challenging opportunity. He went from a firm of 1100 people at Hunter Douglas WFD to a growth organization that was four times larger and is now, three years later, six times larger.

It was easy for Burns to talk about accountability, but it is clear that this was not his favorite topic. At the beginning of the conversation I informed him that the conversation was not about appreciative inquiry. I emphasized that I was researching accountability in organizations.

Moving into the conversation, I asked him how he thinks accountability is perceived in most organizations. He said,

That is a great question. It varies from organization to organization. In the contemporary company today, accountability is where the buck stops. And this is really what they measure and expect people to wave their hand and own up to when things go wrong. Look at Enron, the accountability was at the top even though the CFO may be the one to pay the price.

Burns expanded on his answer, emphasizing individual accountability and measurement. This was characteristic of his emphasis on accountability throughout the conversation. He said,

Recently accountability is really becoming measurable and it is the deciding measure of an individual and the organization. It is the collective result of all the individuals and their accountability, moving up to the organizational accountability and success. I define accountability as signing up for what you are going to do and then doing it--taking the consequences when it does or does not work.

I asked the question again in a different way, "How do you think the people in organizations feel about accountability?" He responded,

This philosophy of accountability is transcending down through all the individuals at even the lower levels. They are also accountable for each of their actions, meeting schedules, getting things out, whatever they are supposed to do and performing to meet minimum expectations when they said they are going to do it. It is that every piece of that chain must meet expectations because we are running leaner and meaner today, with more complexity.

I asked, "How are people held accountable specifically in your organization?" In answering the question, he used the metaphor of a "link in a chain."

What happens is that collectively there is a vision that is established, whether it is sales goals or service levels or what ever. In each unit, such as sales, what will happen then is

each unit has to own up to accounting for delivering on their commitments and then that cascades down to developed measurements, objectives, time lines and schedules that show whether you are tracking to that goal or objective. There is accountability for each link in that chain, measuring, being measured for their piece of that contribution for the overall goal.

Burns expanded on this, giving a description of how support would be given to a manager of a unit at StarTek that was struggling to meet expectations.

It will be individual and situation specific but, as an example, a unit might not be meeting its sales objectives and that gets communicated through the appropriate channels and others may be asked to step in and do a little more to help fill that gap. Or, we might volunteer other resources to help that area that is not meeting its objective, meet its objectives. It is a re-allocation of priorities.

In the following statement, Burns emphasizes the role of the member in asking for help indicating the member must call attention to what is happening when there is an issue. It was also one of the rare times in the conversations that communication, a key issue in CA, was specifically mentioned.

Along the line of responsibility and accountability for individuals, whoever it is that isn't meeting what is expected, they have an obligation and accountability to say, hey, I'm not meeting my goals. [They must] let people know that there is going to be a gap or, on the other side, has exceeded expectations. The key element for that is communication in the accountability world.

The next question was, "What might an accountability encounter look like?" Burns' response mentioned what happens at StarTek if a target or goal of great importance is missed.

It would really depend on the circumstance. It might be coaching, offers of assistance, could be priority reallocations, and, frankly, depending on the importance of [the]

particular target or goal that has been missed, there could be some punitive results. They may not get some incentive payment; a sales person that doesn't get a commission; or on the other hand, there may be more serious consequences. I'll use productivity as an example; the department manager may be using some of the productivity gains to fund further enhancements in the department. If those productivity goals are not met, obviously the dollars will not be there to do other things they planned to do. Go the other way: if they exceed their expectations, there could be an upside to that. They get better reviews, more funds, more help to enhance what they do.

When asked about the term "feedback," he specifically tied feedback to accountability, including it in everyday work.

Feedback is absolutely essential. I'll use the term "validation of accountability." And by that I mean, we as leaders and managers and individuals need to know, did we meet the expectations that we set? Are we accountable for our actions? And the only way you can know that is through feedback. There are a number of ways of getting feedback: others give it to you, you get it in your performance reviews, you get it from your peers, you get it from your customers, you get it at the end of the project or activity. You either did or didn't get to the measurement. Feedback takes many, many forms.

At this point I introduced constructive accountability and we had a clarifying exchange on what it is and when and where it happens in the process of working. I firmly placed accountability during the process of working.

That is really something to think about.... The only thing I would add to that is, you take it to the next level: They also have an obligation to do it. If they are really accountable you have an obligation to point out something or a problem that you see. It is saying, hey look, what about this? If you are really part of a team you have an obligation to do it. When you move accountability into every day practice, it will possibly save a lot of angst down the road. You are not out there on an island. You are still in the boat with other people. I like that. **[He added,]** Turn it into more of a positive context rather than the

negative connotation around accountability. There is a stigma. In CA there is more engagement, you want to strengthen rather than tear down. That is interesting.

I asked him, "What about the leaders? What do you think their role would be in this?"

What obligation does the leader have? To clarify the understanding, validate the commitment. Validate the subsequent accountabilities people are signing up for. And then to continue to measure. They are checking, are we keeping track, are we understanding, is it changing from an apple to an orange? The one thing in today's market is that things change even faster than a year ago. What we talk about today is frequently different next week. In your CA definition, the understanding of all those dynamics that may be affecting that expectation need to be validated and talked about, live and not after the fact. Not through email. Although sometimes, that is the only way to do it so everyone gets the same message.

How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm?

By lessening the punitive implications of accountability. I don't know how to be more succinct about that. Make it ok, reward it, encourage it, enable it. Lessen the stigma associated with the negative side of it. I hate to go back to history, but the beauty of Appreciative Inquiry is looking at what is working, celebrate the fact that you are making changes, that it is ok to go through the CA process in real time. Take the negative stigma away from activities or events.

I was curious, "How do you think organizational leaders would accept this?"

It would be a challenge. And where I am suggesting it would be a challenge is moving toward ennoblement of this kind of a culture, with still maintaining measures of accountability. It is more art than science. People may be a little more reluctant to be accountable early on because it may not work out well. Getting away from that stigma and talking about it now so that you can take a new redirection, so there are no punitive results associated with the whole notion of accountability. But you want to do that

without taking away accountability. To use CA to better relationships in situations and projects while retaining “the buck still stops here.”

When asking him, “Do you think that an ongoing process of CA could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how,” he responded mentioning the political environment of making it happen.

I think doing it would be a skill itself. But what it would definitely do is improve...it would have a good chance of improving attitudes and perceptions within the organization. The skill itself would be doing CA conversations. That in and of itself would be skill in problems solving and communication. That in itself could build skills. You would have to align the political environment to make it possible. That would happen one participant at a time. It is not going to be easy.

The next question was: “Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members?” Burns’ response was a long one. He was fully engaged in answering this question, answering slowly but in depth. He used the word “trust,” something mentioned in passing in five other conversations.

Working in a positive direction, you have to develop relationships, an atmosphere of trust. Trust that you are not going to shoot the messenger and that by being accountable that we are collectively being accountable, which, if you take this to the nth degree, is the ultimate teamwork relationship. We are accountable together, helping each other succeed. The challenge in doing that is, we still have our own jobs to do, our own accountability to live up to. So how do you build a culture around, if you will, collective accountability through trust where everybody gains? And that where when some of the accountabilities may not be met, people don’t get shot, at least, you know, not for the wrong reasons. It is more that it is ok to make a mistake but learn from it and grow. But, on the other hand, don’t continue to make the same mistakes, just don’t repeat them. Be

accountable for improvements. You have to get the organization to talk about how the individual and groups...to talk about how we take that stigma away from the Big A word, Accountability. How do we make that other Big A, Acceptable, appropriate, engaging? You have to get them to see it as a positive thing. Instead of it being half empty, you have to move them to half full.

I asked him to expand on this, asking, "How do you take it into an organization?"

Start at the top. And my reason for starting at the very top is that the very top needs to be working together, they need to be constantly helping each other, from their various perspectives, succeed. And be accountable for what it is they are doing. And if they are doing [accountability] and they are doing it successfully and non-punitively, they are walking the talk, they are setting the behaviors; they are being the role model of the behaviors and allowing that to cascade down into the organization. But if they are not doing it, that is going to enable the culture to allow it not to become part of the culture.

I asked him to get more specific, "Again, Mike, how do you do that?"

Talk about it at the top. Talk about what are the stigmas of accountability; talk about your definition of what CA might be. And you ask how do we do this? Your point is that it has to be continuous, talk about how you make it happen. Heighten their awareness; have them reinforce each other. And when there is misstep, Oh, here is an opportunity. Are we going to help out or are we going to let them take the consequences alone, or are we going to help them get back into alignment. Unfortunately, the old accountability has a lot of bag and baggage. That makes it tough.

Early in the conversation Burns focused on individual accountability, but there were glimmers of constructive accountability in the language he used. He then moved from the traditional form of accountability toward an understanding of what it would mean to move accountability forward into daily life and working relationships. His statement about how to take it into the organization was insightful. His comment, "Heighten their awareness, have them reinforce each other," and

“Oh, here is an opportunity” when something goes awry seemed to be an indication that he understood very well the potential of constructive accountability.

Communication is a huge part of CA and Burns touched on it in ways that emphasized its importance to constructive accountability, suggesting that one is then not alone. “You are not out there on an island. You are still in the boat with other people. I like that.” He felt that CA has a chance at improving attitudes and perceptions within organizations—something I share. He also said, “We are accountable together, helping each other succeed,” a highly CA statement.

Burns openness to the idea of CA and his thinking on the topic suggests that he meant it when he said, “That is really something to think about.”

9. Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Design Division Inc.: Long After AI

Hunter Douglas is a world-leader in window coverings. Almost 90% of its sales come from blinds, curtains, and sunscreens. The company also produces architectural products such as ceiling systems, cladding, and sun louvers. Hunter Douglas operates some 150 companies with more than 60 manufacturing plants and 80 assembly plants worldwide. The company is privately held; CEO Ralph Sonnenberg and his family control the company from the home base in The Netherlands. It has no union presence.

My CA conversations at Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Design (WFD) Division in Broomfield, CO, included two people currently with HD-WFD and one (Burns, above) who is a former VPHR at HD-WFD, all as telephone conversations. I had included Hunter Douglas WFD in a previous book (Seiling, 2001) discussing their “efforts toward internal congruence.” The company had grown from 27 people in 1985 to nearly 1,000 in 1998 and the leadership was seeking ways to re-instill the creativity, flexibility, intimacy and sense of community that had previously led the WFD division to its original success. The sense was that things needed to

change if they were to continue to grow effectively. They called in two consultants, Amanda Trosten-Bloom and Diana Whitney, to use Appreciative Inquiry in an attempt to engage nearly 1,000 employees, customers, suppliers and community members in discovering, dreaming and designing an organization that combined the best of both “past and possibility” (Seiling, 2001, p. 189). In 2000, two years into the process, Rick Pellett, general manager, and Mike Burns, vice president of human resources, noted several of the more striking changes experienced by Hunter Douglas WFD after using the AI approach. Pellet said,

Our production and productivity have both improved—largely as a result of people’s increased participation in ‘problem-solving’ and decision-making activities. Turnover is the lowest it has been for six years, despite extremely low unemployment in our local job market. Our operations improvement suggestions are up over 100 percent. This, in turn, has had a big impact on both our quality and our internal customer service (Seiling, 2001, p. 190).

I was curious about the impact this earlier application of AI would have on views of constructive accountability. Does AI still have a recognizable presence in HD? I learned that when Mike Burns had left HD three years ago and is now with another company (see StarTek), Diane Sadighi had replaced him as the Vice President of Human Resources. I decided to include both Burns and Sadighi in the conversations and, at the suggestion of Amanda Trosten-Bloom, to add Todd Steele, Business Unit Manager.

Diana Sadighi is the VP of HR at Hunter Douglas Window Fashions Division and has been there for three years, succeeding Burns when he left for StarTek. It was an engaging and lively conversation with Sadighi at times saying things I was surprised to hear. She was open and honest with her responses, several times telling of less than attractive leadership behaviors at HD-WFD related to accountability.

Sadighi came to Hunter Douglas WFD after the appreciative inquiry process had been completed. As a result, she heard stories that may not have been completely understandable. There were times, she said, that she wanted to make sure they were true before she could believe them. Eventually, she attended an appreciative inquiry workshop to gain some understanding of what HD had been through. And then she attended a second time.

When we started I was clear that the conversation was not about the appreciative inquiry process. I said, "My topic is accountability and your thoughts on the subject." We began the focus on accountability with the question: How do you think organization members perceive accountability in most organizations today? And, why?

I think the greatest perception of accountability is probably tied up in the corporate governance. I think that is the popular meaning because of the popular press, *Newsweek*, *Time*, where the average person gets their news. To an HR person accountability has a different meaning. Accountability to me is more about meeting commitments, doing what you are saying, whether it is in a personal job description or part of the company's values.

I asked, "How is accountability utilized/activated in most organizations of today?" The phone went silent. I hesitated and, thinking I had been disconnected, asked if she was still there. She said,

I'm thinking... It seems to me that it tends to be in a negative sense, as in "you are not meeting your responsibility," a reactive sense rather than a proactive.

For some reason, the following question seemed to open her up. I asked her, "How are people held accountable specifically at Hunter Douglas?"

I believe that here at Hunter Douglas it is more synonymous with responsibility, job responsibility. In my role as head of HR, I'm held accountable for taking care of employees. I think that is what most people view it as [being]. The head of payroll is

accountable for seeing that all the paychecks are correct and on time. We are very tactically focused. We do a great job executing what we need to do to keep the company running. We spend very little time on planning for the intangibles. We are very good at planning a year forward, but the state of our organization's creativity, culture, etc., we don't do a good job on that. Here is an example: we are very good at hiring a person to fill an open position. We are not very good at identifying the next person in that job, dealing with how people treat each other. Our longer-term intangibles are not good.

I felt this response strayed from the point, "How does accountability happen at HD?" She said, "Oh, I didn't give you enough, huh?" she added,

We do it in one of two ways, complete avoidance or punishment. And, unfortunately, as much a socialist as I am, it is primarily related to status. We are a manufacturing organization and it is very much a punishment or negative reinforcement model: if you don't follow the rules and procedures, we clearly articulate the rules and we do accountability around those rules. Sometimes we get into, 'oh, it is a development issue,' but that is not our first reaction.

Following up on that response, I said, "What would it look like if looking at development was the first reaction?"

It would look like analyzing the circumstances around the undesired behavior and understanding what made that happen. It would look like the assumption on everyone's part that everyone is here to do their job and they want to do it right. If it doesn't happen, you would jump to the better conclusion that, 'oh, they don't have the tools,' 'something wasn't understood,' 'the environment changed,' 'her husband beat her this morning.' You would look for the reason instead of assuming the worst, which leads to punishment.

I asked her about the "normal" responses of the participants, the people experiencing accountability. Are relationships altered following an accountability encounter? If they are improved, what brings about the improvement? Or, if depleted, why does this happen and why?

Yes, the relationships are altered. Because if it is approached from the negative standpoint, you are treated like a child, like you need to be punished, you are demeaned and diminished because a co-worker or manager has told you that 'I assume you did this on purpose.' Maybe not every time, but if it follows the most likely course, if you are punished, it is a whole different dynamic than if it is done from the positive end of the spectrum.

Could you give me a story about when the positive spectrum was used? When it went well?

This one jumps to mind because someone's behavior was not in alignment with my definition; it was a bad attitude. The improvement, the relationship improvement in this case...what happened is that the behavior changed and the performance dramatically improved and altered the relationships in the whole group. It affected other people, more than just the relationship with me. Part of it was definitely both sides of the mouth, saying, 'this is not acceptable.' I'd like to think that I also asked what is happening. There was certainly that piece that told her that it was inappropriate behavior. And there was listening and asking what factors caused this and what we could do to focus on that. I wouldn't point specifically that it improved our relationship more than before but definitely it has been good since. I can't say it was bad before, but it is fine.

What are your thoughts on the term "feedback?"

I don't have a negative connotation around that word. I have a positive one. Although the first thought that comes into mind is "tough" feedback or honest feedback. It may be tough for me and the employee, of course.

When I asked her the following question, a frank response came quickly: Tell me your thoughts on the status of personal responsibility in your organization today.

In my organization... uhmmm, overall, I would say that there is a deficit of people taking personal responsibility for outcomes, whether it is for their career or their pay... Many of them feel they are a victim of the corporation. And I think the organization has to accept

responsibility for fostering that perception. You tell employees that they are the master of their destiny but don't give them the tools, so I guess the truth is, it is about halfway in between.

Could you tell me a story that reflects these thoughts?

One situation I remember dealing with here was when I wasn't giving an employee a pay raise when she had been here for 10 years, had done a good job, was not a problem employee. She wanted a raise and I couldn't give her one. My response was that the method for raises here is skill-based pay which, in my mind, puts a lot of emphasis on learning new skills and jobs to move into higher pay grades and make more money. For her, there was no sense of accountability that she could change her behavior or go about meeting those criteria. She is still here and she is still complaining about it.

At this point I read her the written definition of CA. I had emailed the questions to her just prior to the conversation (with the request that she not read them ahead of time). She read the definition again and then I expanded on the definition emphasizing the ongoing, interactive component. She said, "I sort of struggle with the phrase but the definition makes sense so I accept it."

I followed with, "As an approach that moves accountability into everyday relationships, that moves accountability into how we relate on a day-to-day basis, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace? Could you give me an example of how this approach could be utilized in everyday practice?"

As I was listening to you reading the definition and then reading it through, it feels to me like it is how my department is run, because the numbers of incidents that call for correction are really rare. And yet there are often times that getting back on track discussions happen for both myself and the employees. So the dynamic for me is that the discussions and conversations around that are mutual and they change the dynamics around relationships. They are consistently better.

What about other departments?

I don't think I'm the only one. The critical piece is the leader...what is the personal style of the person leading the group. If you follow a participatory and collaborative model, you are going to have a different perception of accountability than in the old style management model. It is probably not the dominant culture in our organization, unfortunately.

I told her that I feel that there are pockets of constructive accountability already happening in our organizations, yet awareness is an issue. My hope is to make it possible for people to recognize accountability *as not always punishment or holding our feet to the fire*, but part of how people work together. This would make it possible for a culture of accountability to be more positively present in recognizable ways. Then I asked her, what are your thoughts on this?

I guess the first thing that jumps into my mind is I think many successful initiatives are successful because they apply in the workplace as well in personal life. So it applies in personal and family relationships, parent and child relationships, the same as it applies in organizations. I think if you look Covey's 7 Habits, etc., the things that you apply in your general life are more successful. I think [CA] has that component.

We agreed that there is a strong interactive component to CA and that the social context of organizations can decide, through the interactive norms of the workplace, whether constructive accountability becomes/is a part of how people work together. I asked her, "How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of their organization?"

I think there are some skills [that are] building blocks that need to be in place to make it easier or more successful. One that jumps in my mind is active listening, a broad umbrella of communication skills. The whole win-win philosophy. The positive

approach; the optimistic approach that ... the whole sense that if performance is bad, you are not a bad person.

When I asked her if it is possible to move accountability into an organization, to have it seen as useful in organizations around this definition, she answered and then followed with a dilemma that may occur.

Absolutely, I think it is possible for an organization. But what are you going to do with the people who don't follow that norm? Do you allow them to disrupt the culture? Do you allow them to continue as they are? If you look at CA, it is really a path of least resistance. How do you convince them?

I asked if she felt that CA, as an exchange process, could support the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes of the organizational members.

Sure, I think if you accept the proposition of a constant learning environment, that we all learn from each other, and abandon the notion that the leader knows everything and that the people doing the work know what they are doing and that they have something to add, it changes things.

The natural follow up question was, "How do you do that?"

The thing that first jumps into my mind is you lead by example. If you don't see it in the leader...but that is not the easy answer, my boss practices that very much and yet it hasn't trickled down throughout the organization. We are still missing something.

I wanted to hear her thoughts on whether CA could be beneficial to improving the performance and relationships within organizations.

Oh, yeah. We haven't used the T-word, trust. Yeah, absolutely, it could be beneficial. More beneficial in organizations that sort of have the most to learn from it. There are many organizations that are part of the way there. I think the challenge is in demonstrating the benefits in "business-speak." It is when Amanda [Trosten-Bloom]

talks about percentage growth, lower turnover etc., as AI being a catalyst for that, people listen. There is a big chunk of that that says, oh, yeah, that feels like the right thing to do. But the motivation, especially given the economic things, there is more of an emphasis for motivation. You don't do things because it is the right thing to do. You have to answer their question, Why do it?

Again, the follow up question, "How would you answer that question [for the introduction of CA]: why do it?"

[An example is:] We use the Gallup service here and there are questions in their minds regarding how the numbers impact the results but they do it because we ask them to do it. They want cause and effect. You are not talking about standing on your head. It is not a counterintuitive thing, it is easy to say, yes, it is no longer socially acceptable to tell them and punish if they don't do it any more. That is why you do it.

When I asked Sadighi how to take CA into organizations, she was not sure. She said,

I don't know. It probably depends on the organization and how they embrace it. Some combination of leading by example.

She then gave an example of how HD-WFD identified their leadership competencies and how they then quantified them. And now they are looking at developing a "manager's report card" that is "not tied to their performance appraisal." It sounded very linear and specific and probably not, from my thinking, a way to nurture constructive accountability into the workplace.

The conversation with Diana Sadighi flowed easily. There was intervening "easy talk" that made us both comfortable in our exchanges. One thing she said took accountability across the lines of status and title. She said,

There are layers of accountability. There are relationships between us as leaders and the employees and accountability to each other, but there is also accountability to the group. As the leader, I always have to ask myself, what is my accountability to the rest of the team?

Related to how you take CA into the organization, Sadighi indicated discomfort with the “trickle down” process, suggesting that leaders can demonstrate behaviors that suggest a way of working but there is still a struggle to take it into the organization. Her comment that “somehow we are still missing something” is a common dilemma in bringing change in organizations.

Todd Steele has been with Hunter Douglas for 23 years. He started as a machine builder at a separate company. When Hunter Douglas purchased his company he became a welder. He has a degree in business and economics. He came up through the ranks at Hunter Douglas and feels the company offers that opportunity for those who care to take advantage of it. He said, “The company looks hard inside before they go outside for their people.” At Hunter Douglas WFD, Steele describes management as a resource. In mentioning the owners of the company in Holland, he said,

They are not here to tell you what to do on a daily basis. It is a good company and an interesting place for me. Every single one of the three Divisions is different. It gives people options. If you look at accountability, it doesn’t make a company become one personality. It is how we get to the goals and interact on a day-to-day basis within each group. And it is different in each group.

When answering the question, “How do you think accountability is perceived in most organizations today by the organization’s members and why,” Steele gave an expanded response.

The word accountability in a lot of people’s minds is a negative because it gets back to sometime hearing “you will be accountable” in a negative way. It’s viewed by most organizations as a must. It is a lot of different words and it is overused, such as, you are a

team player. I don't think people sit there and say you will get held accountable. It is that you will be held accountable to perform this role, and everybody is accountable to fulfill those roles. If you do, you will be successful. Many organizations look at accountability as, did you fulfill your job function? and it just comes down to an annual review. We try to stay away from that somewhat here and have tried to make it a daily routine or at least more often than not, not in the review when you are told you have done a good job or bad job. When you give the workers your reviews, there should not be surprises in it. If there are, you haven't done your job.

Then, he added,

I guess I would include the employees in our organization; they look at accountability as a negative. I know it used to be that way here. They feel that accountability that is applied to you is different than the [person] who determines if you have reached your goals and met your obligations.

When asked how accountability occurs in most organizations today, he first responded by talking about the measurement of performance. He said,

Applied and measured? It is what we all have to do. You do your long-term strategic goals, etc. That is where the measurements that have to be in it come out so you have your quality goals, output goals, sales goals, etc., and those are turned into metrics that are measured. As I said, those are the easy ones. They can be posted on the board and we've met it or I haven't. That is when people dive in and start to making plans to correct issues. It is all tied to your pay, your bonus, monetary rewards. They are tied to meeting the measure metrics in most businesses today.

Steele continued, turning to the social component of accountability. He said,

Of course, you don't find very many people giving a bonus to someone who is not a nice person. That is outside of the measured metrics. And that is the easy trap...I would say that I am a people-person rather a numbers-person, so I prefer that side. If you are holding someone accountable, you are holding that whole person accountable. There are

lots of people who cannot [work positively with people] and hit their goals. There are also those who burn out their team and have high turnover rates, but they still meet their goals. It's just not the way I would do it. It depends on where the organization puts their emphasis as a management team. The punitive company becomes out of balance when it comes to how the company makes things happen and that is the problem.

In responding to how Hunter Douglas WFD applies accountability, Steele suggests they go beyond measurements to looking at the involvement of the person.

We'll start out the same way as most organization. We use all those measurements but we also have measurements where individuals are expected to perform in teams, again tied to rewards, but it is a choice. You can forego working in teams or not. The teams are focused on process and communications perspectives. These are individuals who are doing their specific jobs and getting together and studying how we can make this better. [They are] not management people. We try to have people held accountable for whatever job they are doing, not the act of looking upward having management telling them how to do it. We say, "You are the experts, how can we make it better?" Some people love it and some people despise it.

What brought you to this thinking?

I guess part of it was AI. You know, we never talk about having a quality system, but as we started to move into AI, it kind of happened at the same time. It started us thinking of how we are using our resources, how to use our strengths to move ahead. Where as early on we were growing at 50% a year on production, it was throw people at it and move, I think we finally caught up on the people and were able to focus on the internal organization while we were also focusing on the customer and the products they need.

Steele talked of another way of "getting there," which was to measure the production in many groups and measurement of the daily performance of individual operations or a piece of equipment.

It is used as a tool to approach the employee and say, ok, here is where your performance is and if you look at Susan who is running the same piece of equipment that you are and she is running better, lets go over and talk to her to see what she is doing to get you up to that level of performance, which has a lot better effect than telling them you are doing a lousy job, pull it together or you are going to lose your job.

He also talked of surveys, specifically a 24-question survey from the book, *Break the Rules*.

[W]hat the 24 questions give you is, are they engaged or not engaged in their job? An engaged employee will perform better and be happier. That book forced, I guess you would say, a lot of interaction on accountability. It is presented directly back to the employees and we work with individual groups to say, ok, there is [one] group called Foundations. In the group we ask four questions. You start there. If your Foundations scores are low, you don't even have a foundation from which to start.

Steele spent several more minutes talking about how the surveys are fed back and then how people are rewarded by their peers through recognition. He offered a comment of comparison of CA to the traditional policy manuals, etc. His comment led me to believe he had "read ahead" on the materials I had sent prior to the call and he already knew what was coming on the description of constructive accountability.

We also have the traditional things: policy manuals, procedures for the development of new products, etc. There are six notebooks here on my bookcase. It is an interesting thought on those things.... It tells us that you are only held accountable if you do something wrong.

When asked, "How does accountability happen at HD," he chuckled,

Nothing every goes wrong here... Ummm, you know it is actually a very positive interaction. Everybody makes mistakes; everyone is going to do it. I am trying to think of something that happened recently and I can't honestly tell you of anything that has happened that was a huge issue. One of the bad things we did 9-10 years ago, we took our best technical people and put them into roles as managers. They are not necessarily

good managers. It was several years ago before we recognized what we had done. We got a lot of things back that say, “my supervisor doesn’t...” We still get those. We still have conflicts with people but it is not as prevalent as it used to be. When it does happen, it is a collaborative discussion. The process here is, the more minds the better the solution.

I asked him, “Within the current interpretation of how accountability happens at Hunter Douglas, what are the ‘normal’ responses of the participants, the people experiencing accountability? Are relationships altered following an accountability encounter? If they are improved, what brings about the improvement? Could you give me a story about this? Could you give me a story about when the positive spectrum was used? When it went well?”

AI brought some of that into it. But we don’t practice AI any more. AI was brought in to give us a focus on the culture and where we want to go, how to get there. But putting a name on something doesn’t give you a culture. You don’t hear the name here anymore. We do practice what we learned through that process, which is more important to me. I look at it as being “us,” not a word. For instance, in a manufacturing environment, accountability is best given instantly, immediate. On the management level, every morning we have a standup meeting to talk about what happened last night, what is going to happen today, how do we meet the goals today, in order to get everybody on the same page today. The goals are set out for the day and once that is attended to, we walk out of the room. That is what we are accountable for. That happens every morning in the manufacturing group. That is their tool for communication.

Steele described the management style of Hunter Douglas WFD.

Typically, management wise, it is a pretty hands-off management style here. The owner is in Holland and his theory is (his father started the company), stay out of people’s hair but they are accountable for their own operation. [It is the] maximum-accountability-with-minimum-interference approach. So management is a resource. They are not here to tell you what to do on a daily basis. You were hired for your skills and abilities; they are there to provide resources and to clarify, get information, etc. Unless you want me to

be involved, I am not going to just show up. You have to ask me to be there. You were hired to do that job, do it. It bothers a lot of our managers... My boss does that because he is too busy to watch me. It is changing your focus to the things you can do effectively. You are there to help.

When asked, "What are your thoughts on "feedback," Steele responded,

It is an act of accountability. Obviously people give you feedback when you do something wrong. The act of having a discussion with anybody is feedback. [It is] when you are exchanging information. It doesn't have to be personal. If you are talking about accountability performance-wise, my attitude is it has to be in a positive way and it has to be immediate. People get the message no matter how it is delivered. Some people you have to hit right between the eyes; you figure how to approach them and work with them. You have to tailor feedback much as you do anything. Some people learn differently. Directly, email, etc. I guess it is "know your people" [in order] to know what is going to work with them. And that is a painful process sometimes because it can create frustrations on both sides.

When asked about "acting responsibly," Steele gave an interesting response. He doesn't expect everyone to give their all—and suggests it would be a disaster if everyone did.

That is one of the toughest ones. There are people who just don't want responsibility. They just want a job. They want to do it 8 hrs a day and go home. They just won't want to think. I wouldn't want to hold them to [doing their best] because if everybody came in to do their very best, you would have people climbing over everybody. They want to live and fulfill things and dreams outside of here. That is good. When it comes to accountability, it makes it tough because it is like they don't care. You can find the people who are willing to be accountable; they will step up to make a difference. Hey, I made a mistake. How do we make it better? They step forward before you even know about it. Those are the types of people who move through an organization. Everybody makes mistakes. I've made some big ones here, lots of money lost. But because of how they handled it, it wasn't a big issue; it didn't turn into an issue. Again it has to be immediate because if they don't step up to accountability it has a ripple effect. Accept

responsibility for it, because if you don't, later on the ramifications are going to be much worse.

We went over the description of constructive accountability included in the sent materials and expanded on it verbally to clarify what end accountability is and that it does not disappear, etc.

He said,

I can't disagree with that at all, actually. It boils down to having a trusting relationship with those you work with; that there is going to be honesty with your team members and you are all there to accomplish the goal. It is a pretty lofty goal.

I asked, "As an approach to accountability that moves into everyday relationships, that moves accountability into how we relate on a day-to-day basis, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace? Could you give me an example of how this approach could be utilized in every day practice?"

The difficult part is, one of the things I underlined in your paragraph, is that it is in the casual and formal places. I think that is what can be ignored many times today. I think of things that I have said in passing to others and how it is construed. I even shy away any more about making comments about how you do this or what is an alternative to this. You find that some will just go out and implement it and you may be in a lot of trouble. Enrolling people in your work for us is engaging. Engaging them, to me means they are fully focused.

I asked the question, "How could an organization improve the possibility that constructive accountability could become a norm of their organization?"

Interaction is so important. You need to be able to say something to somebody without fear of losing your job or being discriminated against because of what you said; you almost have to be a ramification-free environment. There is a lady in my group I have worked for three years, and she does not trust me. She will not say what is on her mind. I think it is past experience. I want her to trust me because I'd rather hear it. I'd take

almost anything. You can't get better unless you hear it and you can't take action without hearing it. The person it comes from is as important as what they say. There are people I would not say things to because I have seen how they act to other individuals and their comments after.

Is it possible to move accountability forward, to have it seen as constructive around this definition?

Since accountability has a negative connotation with people, you have to call it something different. When somebody comes around with an engineering degree, they say, you just have to educate our consumer or customer. When they say you just have to educate, I always say, reengineer it so we don't have to educate them. I guess I am saying that the connotation of accountability is negative. Let's call it something else so we don't have to overcome that perception of individual accountability. I mean, AI, it is all about celebrating your strengths. Accountability has been drummed into your head since you were a child. "You are accountable for knowing the laws." It is driven into your head. Constructive accountability is a collaborative effort. What you are talking about is collaboration. I also understand the component of the accountability portion is that you are expecting me to do what I'm supposed to do so we can all hit that end goal.

I said my thinking is that CA, as an exchange process, supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes. Do you agree that an ongoing process of CA could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how and why?

It does, without putting the tag line [name] on it. I've seen it. The only way I can get better is to tell me I'm not good. Point out things that can help be a better performer. Doing it within the conversation is the constructive part of it. It is, gee, Todd, one of the things I'd like you to do is to go to a seminar on blah as it is one I don't hear you participating about and I'd like your thoughts.

Steele hesitated. He seemed to absorb what he just said and think about it. Then he added,

I hear myself. I am back to being “you haven’t done something and I want more.” It is the here and now, the problem solving issue. It is when [CA] is really a collaborative thing. Something is not working right and you want to get together and look at this thing and say, you know this could be better, what is our end goal, what is our vision for the future of that product? It is happening in the here and now. People will start to bring up previous experience and saying if we could do it this way or switch to that. Those types of things. I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members. I don’t think of it as accountability, I think of it as fun, brainstorming, but it is a form of accountability in that there is an expectation to resolve that issue. Things are not over, when we leave. The discussion was a collaborative exchange but the end result hasn’t happened yet. You still have that collaboration and the activity takes place later. Whatever I do, the rest of the team is responsible for that. I don’t see any one person here being picked out that made things happen. They are rewarded as teams when we celebrate our successes in our short-term teams. When it is over they celebrate, have pizza, get a monetary reward.

Do you think the concept of accountability as constructive and part of the relational aspect of working together, if understood in organizations, could be beneficial to improving the performance and relationships within organizations?

You are talking about my negative mindset on accountability and if you can change my mind and see it as constructive... Uhmmm, I have to say, yes, if I look at accountability as a constructive part of business, and I guess I do or we wouldn’t have teams the way we do... If you can get organizations to believe in accountability that it is constructive... It is just that word I keep tripping over. Sure it is going to be beneficial. It is like what is happening here, it has made us a stronger group, working collaboratively. There are expectations and discussions about achieving what you are supposed to do. In relationships, it is always easy to have a relationship when you know where you stand. If you don’t clarify where you stand and are not open and honest about it, it cannot sustain itself. It becomes hard for everyone.

In another lifetime I was a machinist and I had to hit so many widgets or my pay was docked. There was no participation. I was just another resource. I wasn't even a resource, I was a piece of capital equipment that could be hired or fired at will. My fulfillment came from people on a social level, not on a business level. Today, in this organization, [people] can have the opportunity to be a participant. Of course, I'm sure if you did a survey 35% would say that was not true. But we have people who have made their way up in this organization. We have a policy to look hard inside before you go outside. You get people who want to be enrolled or engaged in their work.

When I asked Steel to "tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace," he referred to the process when Appreciative Inquiry was used to move the culture of the organization several years before. It was a long response but significant to moving toward a culture of accountability.

All of your questions have been so hard! We touched on it a little before. The environment has to be created and obviously, if it doesn't exist now, it has to be top down to see it as a good thing to be constructive and talk to people about anything as long as it is working in a positive direction. That is why you say "constructive." And I don't think that is everywhere here. We will have town meetings three times a year and all employees come in and they can ask any questions. That environment is not here because they don't ask questions. What if they ask a stupid question? What if you look bad? Somehow there has to be a culture where there is not fear of ramifications if you are being constructive. Obviously, there should be ramifications if you are just using it to tear people apart. It is a slow process. The AI process was long and hard. We were a top down company. We had to start small with only a few people. We had to ask the question "why should I do this?" It is natural to protect yourself and not stretch yourself. We asked why would we want to do this?

We started with five and expanded it to the influencers, not necessarily the managers, the ones others looked to. We ended up with about fifteen and went through the process of deciding how it has to work. I think that is kind of where it has to start. It has to be good for you. You have to design it from inside. I don't look at it as being AI

anymore but there is a strong component of it in our organization today. Turning it into something that fits your organization and is designed to work in your organization, something you can live with. Something works, or it just dies a quick death. It takes training and education.

As we filtered down into the organization every employee was talked to about it, it was a large investment of time away from the job and knowing that everyone isn't going to embrace it. You get fanatical about it. To the majority of the population it doesn't look like a lot to them sometimes. They are going to take it or leave it. You have to just keep reinforcing it. It has to drive a lot of people's conversations, structure bonuses and merit increases around what you want to happen, to drive some of the behaviors you want to happen. You have to keep in mind that influencers are not necessarily managers. Most people would say, I have to have my managers involved in it. Yes, the senior managers were the first go-around, but when it went below that it didn't go by title. It went to, hey, this guy influences people. Or, hey, that guy wouldn't add value to the process. It could be anybody. You have to look at who the people are that people in the organization look to, who are "cultural icons." Those people who represent what they want to emulate.

How would you answer the question [for the introduction of CA]: why do it?

It depends on who you are talking to...the manager or the employee; it would be different for every one of them... From a senior management perspective, why would I do it? Because I would get all the brainpower focused on the same objective on a daily basis and keep moving toward that goal. It is going to make a stronger organization.

From an HR perspective, what are you going to create? Less turnover, get people who want to be participants in the business. I can't say everybody, but you get a higher percentage of people who want to support the company or not just be there for just a paycheck. Less cost for recruiting, you sustain your knowledge base. You keep people on board who have knowledge of your business and have longevity within the business.... There are benefits in every part of the organization.

Steele's final words to me were, "You've made me think."

The Steele conversation was longer than most other telephone conversations and hugely beneficial. I remember thinking, I think he has it; and then he would slide back into the individual focus that smacked of traditional accountability. Even he commented, “Oh, I’m sliding back into the old thinking here.”

Steele’s responses included the following statement that highlights that accountability is co-constructed. He said,

Members themselves determine what accountability looks like. Everybody determines what [he or she] want[s] it to look like. Accountability is above and beyond metrics. If you have trust as a value, one person may look at trust differently than others.

Steele, like Christopher Jones (number 10, below), talked of having “stand up meetings” in the mornings to talk of any issues and “decide how the goals can be met for the day.” Jones mentioned them in the context of “stand up conversations” that happen spontaneously while Steele’s version appeared to be a more formalized style of stand up meeting in that it was an expected, regular occurrence.

As with Sadighi and Burns, Steele mentioned HD-WFD’s “growing pains.” He went further in suggesting that how they do accountability is included in those growing pains. When describing how accountability happens specifically at HD, he said, “It has been part of the growing pains. In 1985 we started with a dozen people and now have more than a 1000, so there [are] growing pain[s] there. I’ll say that today we are moving ahead.”

Conversations Questioning the Relevance of Constructive Accountability

The above conversations were gratifying in the number of persons who “saw value” in the concept of CA, yet attention must be paid to those who directly or indirectly questioned the relevance of CA in the organizational context. The following three conversations are offered as

those who questioned CA as an aspect of the organizational context. The first conversation with Christopher Jones is an example of a leader who, in many ways, is practicing the concepts of CA. Jones is actively moving his organization in a direction where organizational members feel more valued and contributive. It is offered in this section because, although he acknowledged there is value to the concept, his conversation suggests, “it is not needed here.” The remaining two conversations are unique in their own ways. Tom LeBlanc of Samsonite questioned the significance of CA and notes that it is better to focus on deliverables. The final conversation with Linda Milanowski states that CA is already happening at Herman-Miller, yet she could not be detoured from focusing on the company’s performance review and plan, an individualized, traditional process of accountability even though it is a technology-based “ongoing” review of performance.

10. Norwood Tool Company: A Stand Up Company

Norwood Tool Company is a machining company in Dayton, OH. The company was started “in the 1920’s, doing some kind of tooling,” and is privately held. Two brothers recently took the reins from their father. The company makes precision machine components and stampings, primarily for the medical disposable instrument community and some automotive work. The company is a small (300+ employees), growing company focused on providing a quality product. The company recently moved into new facilities and is attempting to “manage growth” so it does not outstrip its resources. In recent years, they have regularly won business away from competitors. Norwood’s markets are in the Midwest and Eastern part of the USA with some in the Western part of the country.

The company's philosophy of management has changed in recent years with the hiring of Christopher Jones to "bring structure" to the organization. At that time the company was filled with people who were cynical and constantly complaining. Decisions were made at the highest level, allowing organizational members to avoid responsibility for even the most basic decisions, yet decisions were often made "by the seat of their pants" without full consideration for the impact of what was decided. In the past, as the managing owner walked through the plant he was routinely accosted to decide the biggest and smallest issues—right then. When the brothers became responsible for running the plant, they decided it was critical that someone be brought in to re-organize and bring order out of chaos.

In some ways, the concepts of constructive accountability appeared to be the most evident. They did not use the term "constructive accountability," yet in other ways it appeared to be alive and well in the management philosophy of the combined leadership of the organization.

Christopher H. Jones has been with Norwood Tool for five years, moving from a large automobile plant where he was an engineering manager. When asked about his title and role at Norwood, he stated, "Operations Manager is my sort of title; we don't really have titles. I'm responsible for people issues, staffing, production output, the basic issues of getting things to the customer on a daily, weekly and monthly basis." Jones is a relational leader. He believes in getting out of his chair and going to the people when he wants to ask questions. He has a bachelor's and master's in mechanical engineering, which, he says, "has nothing to do with what I'm doing now." Jones is openly happy with his job, saying,

There are good days and the not so good days, but I look forward to being here everyday. I like the people I work with and we get along great. I have to be really careful about monitoring how much time I am there. My family is important to me...and [laughing] my wife helps monitor it for me too.

The conversation with Jones was especially casual and he did not hesitate to think about answering the questions. It was as if he already had the questions at hand and had studied them, although he had not received them ahead of time. He just talked. It seems that Jones' previous experience, 20+ years at a large automotive plant, has influenced his work as a leader at Norwood—and how not to lead. His bent for inclusion and inviting people into their work has flourished; others are joining him in doing so. As stated earlier, he hesitated to give me a job title, saying,

No one really has a title, except our Quality Manager, and he has to have one because of being audited. Titles imply specific responsibilities and lines and we don't like people saying, "This is my job and I'm not supposed to do something else." Flexibility is important. If you see something that needs to get done, you should do it--and it works. When you hire enough people who can work in an environment like that, things happen.

When asked how the two brother-owners split up their roles in running the company, Jones noted that one of the brothers focuses on sales and the other on accounting and facilities. I asked him which brother is the president, the one responsible for running the company. His reply was, "Well, we don't really have one. We just do it together."

When asked about what accountability is in organizations, he automatically gave his own thoughts on what it is for him. This part of the conversation is offered in an exchange format.

Jones: Accountability means when somebody is responsible to do something or, if you assign somebody the task to do something you can walk away and know it will get done. You don't need to follow up on it.

JGS: Is that what you think it is in the normal organization, like where you were before you came to Norwood?

Jones: No. In the large company where I was before, and in most organizations, accountability meant making sure you had yourself covered and protected enough so you couldn't be held responsible for anything.

JGS: And what happened when you didn't cover yourself?

Jones: Somebody else would be working to make sure you looked bad on the issue.

When asked what it looks like to be accountable in your work, Jones was quick to answer. He did not hesitate:

When someone is working accountably they know what the overall vision or plan is and they know what their role is in that plan. They know the things they have to get done to make it happen and they can figure out the way they are going to do it. They can marshal the resources they need. They can at the end of the day feel good that they actually accomplished something.

I gave Jones a verbal explanation of constructive accountability highlighting that it is pulling accountability into everyday work, etc. His thinking was:

This is pretty normal around here—at least it sounds like what we do. We just haven't put a word to it. When we have questions, we go get the person and talk about it. Each of us is responsible to get our work done, whether it is me or someone on the line. We are all expected to not just let things go. Now I admit, not everyone is getting it, but we keep trying to get them to understand that each person is responsible for getting their work done right and not to wait for someone to check on them. And we are making progress.

After offering my thoughts on “end accountability,” I asked him how it can be minimized and how people can get information before things go wrong. He said,

I guess our take on that is that we don’t wait until the Thursday meeting to decide something. What we find is that the path is not straight. You start at 8 o’clock in the morning; it can blow up by 10. We have lots of little stand up conversations between a few people in the work group and we change directions. So it is very zig-zaggy. You don’t sit around a conference table on Thursday morning and walk through an open issues list, which is what was done where I worked before. That is what you did and nothing got accomplished. All you did was worry about the list and whether your name was on the list, and making excuses. Now there is no list. It is just conversations where you work things out with a small bunch of people and you keep on finding ways to make it better and you get to the end much quicker. I guess in our plant, shoot, as I walk through the plant everybody stops me with ‘this isn’t right’ or this or that. It’s like there is no class system that says you are not allowed to ask me a question or tell me that something isn’t working. It works for us. Man, they say the craziest things to me sometimes.

Jones’ willingness to hand the work over to those closest to the work is not “work as usual.” I asked him if he was purposely attempting to be inclusive and collaborative. He response was a chuckle and this:

It is not about making them feel included. These people are running their own little areas and it’s their show. It goes back to we are there to provide the resources and help resolve the problems that they have and help guide them with their methodologies. Our best bet is to do what we can to get them to want to do their work and then to get out of their way.

When I asked Jones the question “Do you think this approach to accountability would be beneficial in organizations,” I could sense skepticism. It was as if he was answering the question even though he probably thought it is “one of those consultant questions that doesn’t matter.”

He, I would guess, feels that at Norwood they not only wouldn't "do that" but that "it is not needed here." As a result, for him, it would be beneficial, but... He said,

It would be great. You know what, you would find people could take a vacation, their groups would run better, they would have better harmony in the groups and they'd get their stuff done better.

When I asked the final question on how to take CA into an organization, Jones didn't waver from the need to carry the message to those who work directly with the organization members. He said,

I think that if you were introducing something like [CA] you would have to start at the supervisor level and you have to get them to buy into it. What we do here is that we have supervisor lunches where we sit and eat lunch and talk about a subject. Typically, some fact-type stuff and then some soft skill-type stuff to get them on the mode of, ok, we are going to share information, here is where the company is going, here is what we are doing well, and here is what we are not. Try to give more information to them so that they know what is up. And, then for them to carry that message down to group leaders who work with the people.... Can you train it? What we find here [on the factory floor] is, unless we show them by doing, we find that it doesn't sink in. Here is what happens when we try to do [formal] training. When you bring them away from their work environment, a large percent of them look at it as, "Op, I'm off the job and I'm just in this conference room day dreaming." It is tough to get them engaged. So we find that most of our training is by example or quick little get-togethers on the floor.

Jones obviously learned a lot in his earlier organization about how *not* to lead. He has brought an organization a long way in a short time from "one-person-makes-all-the-decisions" to spreading the decisions out to the people who are doing the work. He is realistic, acknowledging that not everyone will ever buy into how things are done now. He is also coaching and supporting supervisors and engineers in moving toward this direction—and hiring people who

already work that way. He also has people who have bought into the approach who are helping others to see the benefits of doing so.

You have to pick the right people, pick them carefully, and you have to nurture them one-on-one. I spend a lot of time just talking to these group leaders. I feel like some days that I have my pom-poms out just making them feel better about their role and giving them some authority and responsibility and kind of guiding them a little bit.

And it is a continuous effort. People are people and some of them are going to always struggle. He said,

You can't criticize for mistakes too much, cause you can't get people gun shy. You have to let them make some decisions, whether you agree with all of them or not, you have to let them make some good ones and some bad ones. We don't punish if [someone] makes a mistake. It is trying to figure out what we did wrong in the first place. We just talk to the group to make them more aware of the issues. What you find is that a lot of those issues... Its, well, Suzy is the one that is allowed to stop it and it is Jenny that found it and if Suzy just blew her off that day then she just says it is the other person's job so I guess I'm ok. We are trying to get more people aware that they have the ability to stop [the machines].

Jones' five years at Norwood appears to have been quite a journey, and the journey continues. His challenge was to bring structure and he appears to be doing "just enough." Things are still pretty loose but things are changing in a positive direction. He seemed to recognize CA as beneficial—and sees it as already present at Norwood. His interest in the topic is limited. "The language would be complicated here. Our people are simple people who just want to do their work as best they can." He doesn't want to complicate something that, to him, doesn't need to be complicated.

11. Samsonite Company: It Can't Stand On Its Own

One of my earliest recollections of Samsonite Company, Denver, CO, was as a child watching television and seeing the “hard” suitcase fall out of the sky, presumably dropped by an airplane, watching it bounce and appear to not be broken. For some reason, I have always been curious about the company, wondering how it is surviving in a “soft-sided” suitcase world. This was my opportunity to find out.

Jesse Shwayder established Samsonite as the Shwayder Trunk Mfg. Co. in 1910. Not long after starting the company, Shwayder decided that it was important to have a symbol of the philosophy upon which the company was founded that all members could turn to in doing their work and making decisions. Today, new organizational members are still introduced to the company’s founding philosophy through the Golden Rule Marble, a marble the size of the pad of your thumb that symbolizes what it means to be a responsible member of the organization. Visitors, including myself, are often given a Golden Rule Marble in a plastic case with an accompanying explanation of what it is in order to understand the strength of Samsonite, even in the worst of times. On a band around the middle of the marble is the statement: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

When you arrive and leave through the lobby, a larger-than-a-basketball bronze form of the original marble symbol is prevalent, located so one must step around it to get to the desk in the lobby. The enormous bronze marble is well worn from the touches of many, and I am told that it still means what it did that many years ago.

Samsonite recently joined other manufacturing companies in moving their manufacturing overseas. They now have a huge, empty building on their campus with a large sign on the interstate nearby advertising the availability of a plant that was part of the company’s history for

decades. For Samsonite, with the company's past history based in Jesse Shwayder's Golden Rule Marble, it must have been a decision based on survival of the company in a highly competitive global marketplace.

The conversation with Tom LeBlanc, VP of HR at Samsonite, started with a discussion of Samsonite's long time focus on treating their members with dignity and respect. LaBlanc has been with Samsonite for four years and he, from the beginning, has been impressed with the caring attitude of the organization. As noted above, he feels the marble represents the culture of the organization. He said, "There have been times I have gone past people who have [the marble] in their hands kind of looking at it when they seem to be thinking on something. It means something to all of us." He noted that leaving the company "is hard to do," pointing to a gentleman across the enclosed atrium from his office. He said, "He has been with the company for forty years and is not inclined to leave any time soon, even though he could. He's still doing something worthwhile, so why leave?"

Moving to discussing accountability, I asked LeBlanc, "How do you think most organization's "do accountability" today? He responded with an emphasis on culture. He said,

It varies by culture. Some organizations look for scapegoats; they play the blame game. Some build accountability into their culture so it is culturally understood, and some organizations don't hold people accountable at all and accept excuses when things go wrong. Accountability has to be very culturally established. Sometimes you see some that have more of a political culture, so you have politics involved in the blame game.

The follow up to that question was, "And, how do you think most organizational members perceive accountability today? And, why?" Again, he talked about accepting excuses and finding scapegoats.

People learn very quickly what the organization's norms and expectations are when it comes to accountability. Their perception of accountability is based upon what the organization has evolved into in terms of what is accepted. You also have people accepting excuses and that is ok. Then you have people who think they have done their best and it is a disappointment when accountability is established as to who is to be the scapegoat.

For LeBlanc, accountability is important to keeping people headed in the same direction. He said,

Without accountability it is ok for people to do anything they want over time, no synchronized goals and objectives. Accountability is the very core element that you have to have in order to have teams work effectively. From their departments, individuals have to have objectives that are aligned in order to obtain objectives that are measurable over time. Otherwise, you have people going in all directions and you are not developing a cohesive team.

When asked how Samsonite practices accountability, he tied accountability to the vision of Samsonite, emphasizing individualized accountability.

We have a well-defined vision and goals with strategy and tactics that are supportive of the vision, with time lines where you have objectives that are attainable that requires every one to be in support of those objectives. We have an excellent performance evaluation program that is designed to bring the organizations goals to the departmental and individual level. You can look at alignment for every individual in the organization to see if they are clearly aligned with organizational vision and tactics.

LeBlanc focused on performance evaluations, saying, "Samsonite puts a lot of emphasis on performance evaluations and they have the best performance review system I've seen in 32

years.” I asked him what made Samsonite’s performance review different from others. His response was,

It all boils down to the one common theme, if you will, if it is important to the people at the top, it is important to the whole organization. Therefore, it becomes important to every tier in the organization. The same could be said of anything, revenues, margins, inventory control, etc. It becomes important to the organization. Individual performance is one of the important measures that the upper management pays attention to.

LeBlanc’s attention remained on performance reviews. When I asked the question regarding the term “feedback,” he responded.

It goes to clearness of communication about what outcome is expected, to what level of quality over a period of time. As you have in any organization, you have miscommunication. To deal with that you have constant feedback so you don’t have surprises. That requires feedback to be ongoing. This is important to the performance review process as opposed to the event where you fill out the forms. So very seldom do you have surprises. The employees feel they have adequate feedback throughout the year. It is the most critical piece, good and bad.

I gave him the definition of constructive accountability and asked him if he had any questions about it. His response was,

It sounds as though it is collaborative. If it were me, it would be better to focus on deliverables. It must be tied to what is expected specifically. I won’t say it is autocratic. It is making sure the subordinate and supervisor is clear as to what it is, how you follow up, etc, making sure the right resources are in place.

I noted his mentioning the subordinate and supervisor as being part of the process and suggested that constructive accountability happens across groups, among peers and in relationships with other departments in discussing questions and making suggestions about work that is being done, etc., that it happens in everyday work. His response was...

It makes it sound as though accountability is part of every interpersonal encounter. That is a bit strong. An example is that one IT person could talk to another IT person about something that happened in the past in a casual conversation and that would make them accountable for what the other person does. If they feel that they are going to be accountable for what the other guy does, they might not like it. I think that is spearheading it too far to others. It would make them want to be even more involved in the other person's work in order to cover themselves or not get involved at all. That is like me being accountable for the next presidential election.

I tried again to clarify that it is an ongoing process that happens in our everyday interchanges, not necessarily with boss/subordinates, but also with our peers and others--that what we think, say or do matters and impacts the work of others, and that the performance review process, although it could be part of the process, is not the focus of CA. His response:

Like in the formation of knowledge, the provision of resources, etc. That is a problem for me because it is like when you have the ring of ten people and one says something and by the time the tenth person hears it, it is completely different. How could you locate the person who changed it?

LeBlanc agreed that communication is important to day-to-day accountability. He said,

Of course, having good communication between individuals and across groups is part of the identification with organizational success, departmental success, team success and individual success. The bunker effect doesn't work, to withhold information or not give people what is expected of them. It has to start at the top and filter down through the tiers in terms of how we are going to engage people in the success of the organization. And certainly collaboration is pretty important to organizational success.

Finally, I asked LeBlanc, "Do you think constructive accountability could positively impact the skills and attitudes of organization members? If so, how?" His response was less than encouraging.

I don't know. I think that constructive accountability is a thread that should be inculcated into the fabric of the culture but I don't think it is a strong enough characteristic that could stand on its own. It must be pulled into the fabric of the organization. It kind of goes hand-in-hand with integrity, if you will.

The conversation on accountability with LeBlanc had a "linear" feel to it. He seemed focused on accountability as being a review process that involved examination of performance between supervisor and subordinate. To be sure, he did not get the connection with it being an ongoing, interactive, relationship-based process between members at all levels. As a result, his thought that it is not a "strong enough characteristic that could stand on its own" was understandable—nor did he seem to understand the collaborative nature of CA, suggesting that avoidance of involvement might be the outcome. Even though he seemed to see it as a weak concept, he did suggest that it should be "pulled into the fabric of the organization." I am assuming he meant the culture of the organization.

I would agree that CA could be viewed as an "abstract theory," that it can be hard to describe or be fully identified as something one does by doing certain things under certain circumstances. And yet, as noted by Colbert (2004, p. 353), Tsoukas (1993) suggests that abstractions are particularly useful for theory building:

From a theory-building point of view, abstractions are very important because they operate at a high level of generality, reveal the generic properties of a variety of phenomena, and can thus be used to explain phenomena across widely different domains (p. 338).

Viewing CA as an abstract theory, as alluded to by LeBlanc, again returns us to the Resource-based View Theory, suggesting that CA flows from complex compositions of relationships, strengths, conversational capabilities, playful interplay, etc., that may or may not be seen as

teachable. And yet the essentialness of “talking” about what CA is and its benefits, as mentioned by several of the participants, removes some of the abstractness through the sponsorship of leaders. Perhaps the methodology for “teaching” CA is to give permission for people to be who they are, to use the talents that have been hidden or withheld, to create opportunities to do things they see as beneficial to the organization they have always wanted to do and to participate at levels of significance in ways they see as relevant to doing their work well.

12. Herman Miller, Inc.: From Ripples of Distinction to The Plan

Herman Miller Inc., Zeeland, MI, was founded in 1923. It has, according to James O’Toole, writer of the Foreword in *Leadership is an Art* (1989) by Max DePree, “generated ripples of distinction—and waves of innovation—since the 1930s.” Max De Pree took over leadership from his father and founder, D.J. De Pree, and his brother, Hugh. And, when he took over, he made changes. He established a leadership legacy that became legendary in the practice of leadership, bringing the company to the forefront of literature on outstanding leadership. A key belief for De Pree was, “People are the heart and spirit of all that counts. Without people, there is no need for leaders.” As for accountability, De Pree states, “Leaders must deliver to their organizations the appropriate services, products, tools, and equipment that people in the organization need in order to be accountable” (De Pree, 1997, p. 13). DePree was one of the first organizational leaders that practiced “servant leadership,” becoming an icon as an organizational leader. It is said that this thinking is still central to the culture of Herman Miller.

Brian Walker became CEO of Herman Miller in July 2004, as a result of a very clear succession plan. He was president and COO prior to that for one-and-a-half years. The plan, it has been said, “has been implemented very smoothly.”

Driving up to the corporate offices of Herman Miller, Inc. (HM), is an experience. One wonders, can this be a corporate office? The building was built in what was then an out-in-the-country atmosphere. In fact, it looks like a BARN one sees in the countryside. It is red. It has tall, double barn doors, and it has silos on each end. The inside is also barn-like. It is open, very open, and includes a supply room called “the shed.” Additionally, it has a large open room with a huge soda fountain with drinks and snacks to be enjoyed in booths both very large and small where meetings are often held, breaks taken, and solitude is achieved by members when needed. Hidden behind a large inside waterfall, this area is called the Barnyard.

In 2004, Herman Miller was fourth in *Fortune Magazine*’s “Most Admired Companies,” among 600 companies considered. Also in 2004, the American Institute of Architects included the Herman Miller office building among its Top Ten Green Building Projects. All of the office areas utilize Herman Miller office systems that are conducive to working in open spaces. They are modern, almost futuristic. They demonstrate their products all through the building. It is an attractive and effective showplace.

Linda Milanowski is the Director of Learning and Development in the People Services Department of Herman Miller. She has been in this department for four of her twenty years with the company and has held this title for a “year or two.” Prior to moving to the corporate offices, she worked at a wholly owned subsidiary as an HR Generalist. Before that she had worked in finance, administration and facilities.

Linda has a lot of pride in Herman Miller and often refers to the company’s history and culture. When we started the conversation by first asking the question about accountability in most organizations, she said, “I would prefer to not speak in generalities. I will focus on Herman

Miller.” Unfortunately, from that point on, she focused on the performance review process at Herman Miller almost exclusively. She started by saying,

To give some history, about three years ago I was responsible for compensation, performance and accountability, leader development and the staffing and compliance areas. In that time period our real focus was to create a more integrated approach to these inside skill groups. We applied those to the hiring processes, the design of the performance plans and doing performance reviews. Often our history here was to use the standard review form, but everyone picked his or her own favorite. [When] we tore all those walls down and became one large company, we looked at things like benefits [and found that] we had five or six benefits plans. We compared them to outside plans and our subsidiaries and found that some of the subs had been ahead of market in some instances so we learned from them and we took our whole organization to a new place. In moving everybody, you have some pluses and minuses but it gets to one plan. When we did that process to the performance plan and review system, there were more than 30 kinds of reviews throughout the organization. We took everyone to one system.

Milnowski then began to tie our conversation about accountability to the newly implemented system. She said,

I really like the new system and it leads so much into our conversation around accountability because the key add we have [to the performance review system] is that we now have a performance plan. I think most of the answers to your questions lead back to the plan. If I know what is expected of me and we visit [it] 3-4 times a year, plus ongoing daily interaction, there should be no stress or surprises at review time. That system is also integrated to our compensation plan. There is a final overall rating and that rating leads to a compensation matrix which, based on where I am in my range and what my performance rating is, intersect that range where I receive a percent of increase. Before the whole system was based on a performance review. [In the past] the work team leader (WTL) had a budget, there was an overall compensation budget of X percent and the WTL decided how to spread that out. The employee could not see a relation between their review and their compensation. Now they can.

This focus on Herman Miller's performance plan and performance review was Milanowski's "place to go to" for all questions in the conversation. My attempts to move her to look at other facets of accountability seemed futile. I hoped to move her somewhat off the plan by asking the following question, "Would you say there is a coaching aspect to this review process?"

Absolutely, let's go there. Clearly there is a heavy piece here. Ideally working together on the plan through the year makes it possible. The feedback, of course, is an element we need more of. A couple years ago I felt we needed to bring the coaching skill into the HR department. I wanted to see more coaching. We did an introductory course with all our people with CTI [Coaches Training Institute]. We went through their five courses and their certification program over six months, about 8 hours a week, roughly. My sense is that there are a lot of people out there that say they do coaching and they do damage. People call them and it is, can you fix this person? They send them over and fix them. We are at the early side of this, at the early definition stage, defining what coaching is, what mentoring is, what is the difference, and who gets it when.

In another attempt to move from the plan, I asked her the following, "What can accountability look like separate from the performance review?"

Sometimes it is annual plans and charts of work. But I would argue that sometimes they are different from my performance plan. They must be perfectly aligned or I am not sure as to what I am working on and accountable for. And, of course, there is corporate-wide accountability. There is accountability to that overall goal. And there is accountability for the overriding goals such as quality, on time shipments, financial, etc.

I asked her about the people-side of accountability. She said,

Another way to look at accountability is one of cultural values—the whole notion of ownership; you could tie that closely to initiative. If I don't own what I do and look at it as a sidebar, can you see and know and expect a result, and do I know what I must do to

achieve this goal? If you think, for example, that the effort outweighs the benefit and you don't see it as worthwhile, you should push back and say, "I don't see this as a good use of my time."

She then returned to the plan:

Behaviors are huge. It is 50% of the plan. You can get great results but if there are dead people along the way that is not going to cut it here. I expected a huge cultural debate around "should it be 75-25" or whatever and in the end I said to my group, here it is and I am confident with it. It is really important. People seldom are fired for lack of results; they get fired for their people results. Both [sections] are important. As an organization we are so culture-based that it is definitely both. In the end, the debate did not happen.

I introduced the description of constructive accountability to her (she had received the email version) and added comments on the ongoing aspect and moving it forward into everyday work. I asked if she had any questions and then I asked her, "As a new approach to accountability, what impact do you see this thinking could have on how people interact and relate to each other in the workplace?" She responded referring to the CEOs re-writing of De Pree's corporate values. (He and a paid writer wrote them and presented them to organizational members as a revision into today's world. They are referred to as "Things That Matter.")

I think it has a big impact on how people relate to each other. One of our new words in Things That Matter is *transparency*. If I walk into a meeting with a hidden agenda or I have an opinion on something and I don't call it out, I waste a lot of time trying to move things my way. If I call it out, we can get to the bottom line a lot quicker. These are not new ideals; they are a consideration of how we as an organization need to behave to drive our business strategy.

I again discussed the ongoing aspect of CA, re-emphasizing relationships—both between organizational members as they work together each day and across status and title. Each time

she returned to the plan and the review processes. When asked how constructive accountability could be taken into an organization, Milanowski referred back to the plan and review. She said,

Put it into their performance plans and reviews. Describe the behavior that is expected in their review. Let's go back to the beginning of our conversation when I spoke about integrating the HR practices. What is consistent must be in all of our practices in order to get the culture and results and to move the organization to new places. As we re-write the values, as soon as we finish we must update the performance plan to reflect those values. If there is nothing in my performance plan [that reflects those values], things will not be focused on in our daily work. You will not get the mass movement of change in the culture of our company.

Finally, in answer to the question, "Do you think this approach to accountability could be useful in organizations today," she said,

I'm not sure adding a new terminology will do that. For us, it is around our practices. One of the strengths is that we struggle with the pendulum of people and business results. In our history we have allowed our pendulum to swing either direction too far. I believe the tension in the middle is a healthy one and we pay attention to that.

The answer didn't seem to answer my question but I moved on to the final question. I was ready to complete the "conversation." My final question was, "Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in new ways of leading or training and development of organizational members?"

Again, looking at Herman Miller, we are already applying it here through our performance plan and review. It is important to us that we have consistency across the organization and this is how we do it.

I was confused and almost disappointed with my conversations at Herman Miller. Milanowski's beliefs in consistency and how to move toward "new places" are somewhat daunting to me. I did

not sense that relationships and relational processes are center-stage to her thinking. Measurement and review based on a “plan” are center stage. The collaborative process that nurtures relationships and enthusiasm is also absent in her discussions of “the plan.” Again, I was disappointed that the version of accountability at Herman Miller, although more “friendly” than many, was located, from her description, in the technological aspects and how technology can affect the day-to-day performance review process. Ultimately, the unquestionable numbers of The Performance Plan and the Performance Review appears to be the goal. I am not sure that this focus would have occurred in talking with someone else at Herman Miller. I’m hoping I was directed to the wrong person at Herman Miller.

Closing Thoughts

Nine of the fourteen conversations suggested that the development of workplace relationships through the use of constructive accountability is relevant to workplace achievement for the members and the organization.

Chapter four is the “enriched account” of constructive accountability. It is in this chapter that the revised model of constructive accountability is considered.

Chapter 4

Constructive Accountability: The Enriched Account

Constructive: constructing or tending to construct; helping to improve.

Accountability: an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one's actions.

Constructive Accountability: *an ongoing process of relationship that contributes to a mutuality of sensemaking and its outcomes, bringing a heightened willingness to be collaboratively contributive and responsible in the workplace.*

Social constructionism suggests that people have alternatives as to how “reality” is created—also how one’s own “truth” is constructed. It is concerned with the process by which people come to their understandings, not the understanding itself. Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen (2004) define social constructionism as “the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities” (p.7). This places CA firmly in the realm of social constructionism: it is within the existence of ongoing collaborative activities that accountability occurs beneficially.

It is in conversations, within ongoing exchanges of accounts, that relationships are created and sustained over time and that productive work becomes possible. Work life, because it is ultimately relationally situated, does not take place in a vacuum. Constructive accountability emerges within relationships through conversations that are collaborative and relational. These conversations create “accepted sense” and design co-created responsibility and action. It is in these relationship-based practices that constructive accountability becomes real. Significant to these activities, as noted by Sheila McNamee, is community. She said, “Unless we acknowledge the communities within which we realize our possibilities and constraints, we end up in an

individualized ideology” (September, 2004, personal communication). It is within the social interaction of the community that the organization continues to exist and evolve.

According to Margaret Wheatley (2002), “Conversation is the natural way we humans think together” (p. 41-42). Mutually acceptable perspectives are constructed in conversation, whether valid or not, whether of value or not, within a flexible framework of co-construction. Co-construction occurs through ongoing, dynamic interactions of relationship. Thus, it is in active discussion about what accountability is that people reflect on beliefs and assumptions and attempt to move to new thinking. Within this experience the construction of a “sensible” and sensitive form of accountable life occurs. The acknowledgements of others determine whether those beliefs are constituted as beneficial or not beneficial.

How do we get to accountability that is constructive, or as Burns put it, “the other Big A, Acceptable?” He answered his own question by saying, “You have to get them to see [accountability] as a positive thing.”

It is also in interaction that it is decided what “constructive” means. These interactions allow the community to engage in a continuous process of discovery and renewal. Ultimately, people together arrange their language and experiences of events and relationships; they choose ways of understanding that are acceptable accounts of themselves and the world around them (White and Epston, 1990, p. 10, noted in Freedman and Combs, 1996, p. 30). Assumptions are co-created, whether positive or negative, in which “one” and/or many see the world. In our conversation, Salmon said,

If you believe the statement that we live in worlds that our questions create, then dialogue, which is really inquiry based, is always seeking clarification and deeper understanding of the image of the world, the results, if you will, of what we wish to create together. They become construction conversations.

“Understandable” language is created and used locally and globally to get things done and to design shortcuts to do things quickly. CA includes the “centrality of language (multiple realities and multiple selves) and is performative,” as suggested by Gergen (1996).

These conversations were difficult for some of the participants. They all had a desire to be helpful, and yet moving to a new scenario of accountability was a stretch for some. For example, the conversation included lots of hesitations, such as, “I am thinking...” (Sadighi); “Boy, that is a hard question,” (Stavros); “That is a great question” (Burns), “All these questions are hard ones” (Steele); “This is deep” (Salmon); “Uhhmms” and other statements that indicated what Sadighi called “mind stretches.” This is a new language and it is “tough to put your arms around it.”

It became evident in the conversations that **accountability is a mindset**, an overarching understanding (“metaconversation”) or, as noted by Langer (1989, p. 37), a “premature cognitive commitment.” And yet, within the mindset of accountability, there is confusion about how to “do” accountability, and there is little clarity as to how to “be accountable.” Accordingly, for some participants the understanding that accountability is done in a certain way determines its value, potentially constructing judgments of what is “the right way” to apply accountability. As noted by Steele, “Accountability is above and beyond metrics. If you have trust as a value, one person may look at trust differently than others.”

The commitment to a mindset determines how people will see, understand and act, in this case, in applying and experiencing accountability. What is valued also creates a context that influences perceptions of what accountability means, constructs how it is experienced and adjusts one’s perception as to whether it is effective. LeBlanc, for example, resisted the “ongoing” aspect and exchange of accountability within everyday encounters. He felt it was

“spearheading it too far to others” and “that would make them want to be even more involved in the other person’s work or not involved at all.” This appears to say that members prefer to stay out of the work of others, eliminating the opportunity to interact about mutual issues and concerns. I asked myself, does this suggest for LeBlanc that control of each person and localization of his or her work is less problematic and to be desired? Is he suggesting that mutuality is a problem that must be controlled—and that control is essential? As a mindset, this places his thinking in the individualized realm.

Additionally, although intrigued by the concept, some did not seem to be willing to take it seriously. Jones was willing to talk about CA but felt the language would be hard to explain; it is too complex. Webster conceded that it could be an “influencing factor” while stating that it is not “strong enough to stand on its own.” Others suggested the use of another name—although appreciating the offered description.

Unfortunately, the conversations made it clear, as noted above, that there is **confusion as to what accountability is** in organizations. It was as if they were saying: I know accountability when I see it...but I don’t have to like it. There were also those who claimed to “understand” and currently use the CA concept, although, in my thinking, for many a linear focus limited understanding of the concept.

An example of CA offered by one leader noted that, as a last resort, executives would go “out of a meeting to organizational members for input.” This reflects the “two-way accountability” referred to by Culbert and Ullmen (2001) in chapter one of this text, that appears to maintain the status issues of the hierarchical relationships developed in the past. The interactive and mutual sensemaking nature of CA was not there. People in this organization, it was offered, have permission to influence through asking questions and giving suggestions. The

message I received was that asking questions and giving suggestions is fine as long as the leaders and managers are still in control. In other words, members have permission to influence decisions—when they are asked their opinion. Under these circumstances, a casual atmosphere is seen as pleasant, but the suggestions and questions of the members may not be taken seriously. Some offered stories that they felt characterized CA. These stories held the accoutrements of traditional, after-the-fault accountability.

The conversations further defined, for me, the components of both the traditional and constructive forms of accountability. In the following, I will use the *Components of Accountability* to create a “frame” for the traditional form of accountability and to create a model of constructive accountability. I will include comments from the conversations and research-based notations to emphasize my learnings from the conversations regarding these components.

As noted earlier, these components are: the underlying understanding, application in practice and social patterning.

The Components of Traditional Accountability

I am suggesting that the current form of traditional accountability could be noted as *economic accountability*—a form of accountability that is based in early 20th century mechanistic thinking. It is focused on efficiency and effectiveness, ignoring the collective person as contributor to the outcome, while placing those in authority as the ones to whom everyone is accountable. Those in authority are the knowers; they decide if something has been done right and/or if the person has behaved appropriately and according to rules and procedures designed by the rule makers. Although much has changed in designing new forms of leading, accountability is still held in this mechanistic frame.

The Underlying Understanding of Traditional Accountability

There is an *underlying understanding* in traditional accountability of what accountability is, what it means to perform rationally, and why it is useful to govern performance. (An “underlying understanding” is the often unspoken cultural thinking of the organization that indicates how things are done.) This traditional underlying understanding component identifies what I call “end accountability” as necessary for leaders to control the workers. As the workers understand it, accountability is something to be avoided, even feared, and that it takes place after something has gone wrong. The understanding that discomfort will result when not complying fully with what is expected is daunting. The organizational member focuses on the possibility of punishment.

The *theory of system justification* suggests traditional accountability remains in place because people tend to accept existing institutions and procedures as fair, legitimate, natural, and inevitable. They do so in part because (1) they are motivated to conserve cognitive and behavioral resources, and (2) people are motivated to preserve the sense that the world is a fair place in which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (Jost, Kruglanski and Simon, 1999, p. 95). Accountability is understood as important. People do not question what is seen as functional and justified. LeBlanc suggests,

Without accountability it is ok for everyone to do anything they want over time, no synchronized goals and objectives. Accountability is the very core element that you have to have in order to have teams work effectively.

This suggests that accountability, as an organizational “need,” has not as yet been reframed or re-justified in ways congruent with the recent move toward participative and involvement-oriented workplace communities. Accountability remains individually focused and unquestioned.

Trudell indicated she has found clear signs of dysfunctional accountability in the organizations in which she has worked. The assumption is that the person being held to account has done something that does not fit the expectations of the person(s) holding him or her accountable. What has been done is perceived as “bad,” not permitted and/or not meeting standards. To perform rationally is to do what is expected within the boundaries or designations of the accounter. To be a “performer” is to follow the rules and do what is seen as acceptable.

Unfortunately, after-the-fault accountability is sometimes present in formidable forms. Members sense that there will be a price to pay if there is a misstep or they do not fully understand what is to be done. Yet some are afraid to ask for help or information when needed. To ask is to be seen as a problem or ignorant. The underlying understanding is that the accountee is at a disadvantage and should avoid blame at all costs. Furthermore, when one is called to account, it is going to be painful. Salmon verified this when he said that accountability is perceived in “a negative frame – something to be avoided, something painful for both sides involved.” He suggests it is duress. It is based on trying to place blame and to find out who did something, how it has gone wrong and why. LeBlanc said that some organizations look for scapegoats; they are playing the blame game. Stavros noted the potential response of organization members as, “Oh, my God, this is my job and I’d better get it done because sooner or later somebody is going to notice it isn’t getting done.” Elston said, “When something went wrong there would be an investigation.” She added, “A lot of all the hunting for problems and the analysis was done half heartedly; they were just going through the motions,” suggesting no one really wanted to address the tough issues.

The conversations, either directly or subtly focused on individualized accountability. Several focused on performance reviews as the location of accountability. The underlying

understanding of traditional accountability from management's standpoint might be paraphrased as:

People need to be controlled and watched. The best way to control people is through fear and punishment, bringing them to do the right thing. When something goes wrong or fails, you must locate the one person responsible, demand an account and hold him or her accountable. This will solve the problem.

This underlying understanding of accountability frames the way interactive relationships do or do not happen. This frame also adjusts the productivity possibilities within relationships. Having a rational and measurement-focused accountability system, without including the relational exchange processes essential to doing one's work well, affects the willingness to be responsible at a higher level. After all, one participant noted that people think, what if I make a mistake? Someone will notice. I'll just do what is safe, their way. They 'know' best.

Measurement was emphasized by three participants as part of accountability and also alluded to by those who considered performance reviews as accountability. Trudell sees measurement as valuable but sees it as being difficult in today's matrix organizations. She said, "It becomes more difficult to hold people accountable because qualitative is more in use and it is more confusing; quantitative measurement has less value." Salmons said, "Measurement and accountability take a lot more effort and take a longer-term focus, [when priorities shift] it gets dropped off the plate or done inconsistently." Steele, in talking about measurement, said,

It is what we all have to do. When you do your long term strategic goals, etc., that is where the measurements that have to be in it come out so you have your quality goals, output goals, sales goals, etc., and those are turned into metrics that are measured. Those are the easy ones. They can be posted on the board and we've met it or not. That is when people dive in and start to making plans to correct issues. It is all tied to your pay,

your bonus, monetary rewards; they are tied to meeting the measure metrics in most businesses today.

Burns noted, “Recently accountability is really becoming measurable and it is the deciding measure of an individual and the organization.” It is a “proving device” used without inserting the subjective to understand what the numbers fully mean. Measurement is also done for less than meaningful reasons without input from those who understand the context of the situation. The question must always be asked: Why are we measuring this? What do these numbers really mean? Who needs to be involved here? Does it really matter? Unfortunately, when holding someone to account, measurement is often used to prove what is already assumed—that someone or something is wrong.

This emphasis on measurement would suggest that the underlying understanding component of traditional accountability includes a linear metaphor of the organization. After hearing the description of CA, LeBlanc, for example, said,

If it were me, it would be better to focus on deliverables. It must be tied to what is expected specifically. I won’t say it is autocratic; it is making sure the subordinate and supervisor are clear as to what it is, how you follow up, etc, making sure the right resources are in place.

A linear view was present in many of the responses to the questions on accountability, especially prior to introducing the description of constructive accountability in the conversations. Paul Stavros noted that most people react to the word accountability through a chain-of-command answer, “I’m accountable to my supervisor.” Milanowski focused her comments almost entirely on Herman Miller’s review plan and review process. LeBlanc, Salmon and others also talked of

accountability being a performance review process. Several altered this focus following introduction to constructive accountability.

There was an indication that hierarchical relationships are still strong and of great importance. Stavros, Webster, Salmon, Dagues and Milanowski emphasized the role of leaders, or specifically, the organizational hierarchy in accountability. Titles and knowing who is specifically responsible for making the final decision appears to be important to know. Thus,

- Accountability is only performed by those in charge, the “knowers” in the organization
- Accountability requires the location of the one person at fault and making that person pay
- Accountability is inevitably painful, thus, it must be review-based and unquestionable
- “Doing accountability” is essential but no one likes to do it or experience it.

The mindset of traditional accountability often includes a determination of deficiency and fault. When the fault occurs, the next action is to seek validation of the deficiency—and one usually finds what one is seeking. The one-way communication of accountability inhibits reflection, re-reasoning, positive projection and/or mutual clarification. The desire to re-think is quashed by finding what is sought: deficiency. Traditional accountability relies heavily on rules and regulations. When one does not perform as expected, the rules can be rigidly enforced or ignored. Members have to “sense” where there is flexibility, often leaving them open to unexpected enforcement. Steele noted the policy and procedures manuals on his desk. He said,

We also have the traditional things: policy manuals, procedures for the development of new products, etc. There are six notebooks here on my bookcase. It is an interesting thought on those things.... It tells us that you are only held accountable if you do something wrong.

Traditional accountability allows for facts to be presented and for the “cleanness” of being able to do something about it instead of having to talk. Conversing is too often discouraged or eliminated as an unnecessary activity. The accountant, according to an interviewee, has already decided what needs to be done. Also, because of the generalized underlying understanding of traditional accountability, titles and knowing to whom one is specifically accountable can be comforting. How accountability occurs and performed by who is embedded in the underlying understanding of what traditional accountability “is.”

Changing the process and understandings of accountability to a more constructive way of working will be significant to the participative and more generative work of the 21st century.

The Application in Practice Component of Traditional Accountability

In addition to an underlying understanding, there is an *application in practice component* of traditional accountability. This component is essentially a set of day-to-day activities that converts understanding into action. Application might include, for example, boundary-setting rules and procedures defining who can perform various activities (plus the infamous policy and procedure manuals). As one conversation participant, concerned that the culture of accountability in her organization was limiting, noted, “We clearly articulate the rules and we do accountability around those rules.” The application in practice component of traditional accountability identifies how and who gives and receives accounts in day-to-day organizational life. As noted above, when executed in the traditional way, accountability can be experienced as the placement of individualized blame and shame. It can be painful and relentless, leaving one feeling punished and beaten down. The activity includes a person in a superior position demanding an account. The accountee responds (if given the opportunity) with an explanation,

excuse or justification. The accountant then selects/dictates an action to be taken. Agreement as to what is to be done is not required.

For those who saw accountability as a review process, I sensed an unmentioned understanding that reviews are deficit-identifying activities. Even if much has been done “right,” rewards may be limited by the things (often small) that went wrong. People conducting performance reviews have long memories. Steele mentioned a friend who recently had his review. He didn’t get his increase because he had had one altercation with someone--and he didn’t know it was on the table. He had reached all his goals but that single forgotten altercation had him looking for another job.

In the case of Herman Miller, documentation is key to a “fair” review. Milanowski suggested that the reviewer and reviewee should visit the plan on their computer on a regular basis so “they know where they stand.” That way, “there are no surprises” in the application component when the review happens. The computer, as the instrument, provides “a place to go to” to verify why and what is happening. As Milanowski pointed out, the final overall performance review rating “leads to a compensation matrix which, based on where I am in my range and what my performance rating is, intersect that range where I receive an identified percent of increase.” There is nothing to discuss or challenge. There is a final outcome, a rating number that is produced by the computer. This suggests, I assume, that fairness has occurred and is unquestioned and unquestionable. After all, “the computer knows.”

“Responsibility,” in traditional language, is placed with the individual. According to Trudell, it is being a “mature adult.” Stavros noted that for most people, “They tell me what to do and I am responsible for doing it.” Elston suggested that being responsible is a struggle when “employees are treated like juveniles.” Jones said that, when working in a large corporation, the

goal was to “make sure you had yourself covered and protected enough so you couldn’t be held responsible for anything.” Trudell also said,

Responsibility is your scope of engagement...this is how you will engage in your responsibility role. Accountability is what you hold them accountable for, the results of what that person is accountable for contributing.

In the responses regarding responsibility in their organizations, it is apparent that “a new view of accountability” could be beneficial to the willingness to be responsible. As Marais said, “[Personal responsibility] is assumed, but not nurtured. People get assigned a job and then their manager looks over their shoulders too much, or actually interferes with the actual job.” Moving into constructive accountability based on relationships could affect what “being responsible” looks like in the minds of organizational members.

Others also responded that personal responsibility is an issue in organizations. Sadighi said, “Overall, I would say that there is a deficit of people taking personal responsibility for outcomes, whether it is for their career or their pay.” Steele provided an interesting response:

That is one of the toughest issues. There are people who just don’t want responsibility. They just want a job. They want to do it 8 hours a day and go home. They just don’t want to think. I wouldn’t want to hold them to that because if everybody came in to do [his or her] very best, you would have people climbing over everybody.

Elston suggested that people, even when “herded” like children, are not given the information they need to do their work responsibly. Ultimately, not having work enhancing information brings mistakes that are seen as a result of irresponsible behavior. Correction follows and one is called on the carpet to give an account that may be heard as insufficient.

The use of accountability as a **corrective tool** by those in charge was prominent. Early in many of the conversations, the participants were comfortable with this interpretation of accountability. Webster said,

Accountability in most organizations is pretty much focused on what you do wrong...people are watching and they decide if I've done something right or wrong. If they are my bosses, they will tell me so and make sure I understand that I did it wrong. Sometimes it is kind of hard to take. If it is someone I work with, I can ignore it.

Marais said, "Accountability is formally invoked when there is trouble... The tendency is to try to attribute blame." Meyer, from the same organization, offered an enlightening suggestion that

an interesting phenomenon exists in which people at lower levels (where job outcomes are easier to define and hence "police") are more easily held accountable than at higher levels in the organizational hierarchy, where the "good" or "bad" of performance can be argued in various directions.

For those reporting to the leaders, it appears that when one does not act in ways that are seen as responsible, like a mature adult, correction and control will be the chosen action. It should be noted that considerable experimental evidence indicates that traditional accountability practices of correction and control can impact both *what* people think (the beliefs and preferences they express) and *how* they think (the strategies that underlie those beliefs and preferences) (Tetlock, 1998, p. 632). As a result, accountability practices (applications) also influence the social dynamics in organizations.

Accountability, as part of the 20th century theory of control, has required rules, facts, threats, definitive procedures and designations of authority. Dagues offered a description of "old school" accountability suggesting its purpose is inevitably to discipline. This approach assumes that people work primarily for self-interest and extrinsic rewards, justifying the need to control.

Also according to Dagues, accountability is often formal and to be documented because, as the leader, “you have to be protected.” This statement mirrors the description of accountability offered by Brooks (1995). Brooks, as noted in Chapter 1, suggests that *sanctions* are essential to performance. He makes it clear that, for leaders, “*the purpose of sanctions is not to act as a threat to you but as a guarantee to me*” (p.13, emphasis in text).

The “function” of accountability—locating and dealing with the problem, seemed prominent in the conversations. Applications of traditional accountability seemed to include the accountant’s use of a linear approach. Typically, this approach focuses on “the incident,” de-emphasizing issues that may have contributed to the situation and/or the role of other members who, through their influence, contributed to the situation. The goal is specifically to locate blame and to make sure “it” doesn’t happen again. The accountant does not work with the organizational member to see what could be learned from the incident. Finding the one person to blame or shame is the primary role of traditional accountability.

The Social Patterning Component of Traditional Accountability

The *social patterning component* of traditional accountability refers to the social dynamics or social patterning that results from beliefs about accountability and related action.

If one listens to the conversations that focus on performance reviews, there is a sense that the social component (which for Milanowski was 50% of the Herman Miller process) is often addressed as something to be improved. Yet, when one feels threatened and uneasy about the political matters that are present in the review process and everyday work, it is natural to avoid asking risky questions regarding one’s work. It may even feel risky to ask one’s peers informational questions. One does not want to appear “not knowing.” There is a sense that one is limited and bound by social and mechanistic mores that are not sensible to gaining needed

information. When one feels threatened and uneasy, limiting social patterns of how work is accomplished emerge. Jones noted this in talking about people hired from the automotive industry. He said,

Those people that come from an automotive mindset, all they care about is production numbers and volume. They don't care about the quality level and so they go through a shock orientation with us when we throw away parts we don't like just because they don't look nice. Most of these people come from places that say, shut up, hit those palm buttons, keep going and don't stop. And don't ever question us.

In the "shut up, hit-those-palm-buttons" environment noted by Jones, mutuality and the talk that goes with it are seen as a problem. Based on his experience of workers at these machines, Jones says that in some organizations workers, especially at the lower levels, do not experience dignity and respect. To assume that this relational dynamic does not impact the application of accountability is to ignore the stress of working in this environment.

Under conditions of control, conversational patterns become one-sided, with those held accountable limited to agreement and compliance. Assumptions regarding control insinuate acceptance, that questioning by the other is unnecessary and possibly problematic. If one-sided conversations become typical, it becomes integrated into the conscious and unconscious way of performing. Member silence potentially becomes the norm. Unfortunately, according to Elston, "Sometimes it becomes more what I can get away with and, if I don't agree, what is the least amount I can do and stay under the radar."

Meyer, as noted above, suggested that, as you go higher in organizations, you have more permission to say what you want to say. In effect, as you enter control centers of the organization, you are finally able to contribute fully to organizational meaning making. And yet, according to two conversation participants, organization leaders who fail or abuse are often not

held accountable. When an organization fails because of poor leadership, the management team is rarely held accountable for their poor management. Instead, those at the lower levels suffer and/or get blamed. The social element at the upper level grants immunity to those who fail, pointing fingers below to locate blame. Trudell agreed with Meyer. She said, "The poor people underneath the leadership keep asking why they [the leaders] are not being held accountable."

Several participants mentioned organizational culture. Dagues, answering the opening question regarding "what is accountability," responded, "It is a cultural thing." Accountability is different in different organizations. Stavros, in talking about his own experience, said that he had left his last employer because the culture was "punishing and unrelenting." He also placed the design of the organization's culture squarely in the hands of its leaders. Elston talked of how P&G's culture had shifted away from a highly innovative and collaborative culture of the 80's—and not shifted back, because of the leadership.

Dagues emphasized that culture influences whether you meet your commitments or not and saw **commitment** as an element of being accountable. As a theme, commitment was largely missing from the interviews, except with Dagues. Meyer and Burns mentioned it in passing, but for Dagues it was important. He tied it to integrity in talking about "doing what I need to do to get the job done." He said,

We defined it [integrity] as "Honor thy commitment." Then the discussion about commitment goes into accountability...you need to be accountable for honoring your commitment. Don't make a commitment you can't honor... What you see in old-line thinking is, you are not committing, I am committing you. I am telling you what to honor. You aren't even being asked to commit. You are being told to commit.

Commitment is difficult to achieve when organizational members are struggling to cope on the job. Salovey, Gedell, Detweiler and Meyer (1999) point out that "coping is primarily a response

to *emotions*, particularly negative emotions” (p. 141, emphasis in text). Positive coping through connection and involvement enables the building and utilization of patterns of social support. Positive coping also makes it possible to disclose issues that are causing discomfort. How committed people are and how work is mutually accomplished supports positive coping patterns. It appears that traditional accountability does not encourage emotional commitment, potentially jeopardizing positive social patterning.

Not getting things done and not “being good” or “responsible” can be painful in a social environment where find-and-punish traditional accountability is the norm. Someone may be abusively questioned or used as a “bad” example to his or her peers. Making excuses and justifying becomes part of how work gets done. In this environment, fairness and ethical treatment are often sensed as “not happening here” by organizational members. A **sense of unfairness** is invited when one feels unheard. Unfairness leads to frustration and a further loss of commitment. Continually being treated as “not knowing” and not being included as significant to group and organizational achievement impacts member perceptions of unfairness.

Trudell also mentioned issues of fairness. Without a perception of fairness, the accountee may feel victimized. This feeling can occur when one feels punished or unheard in accountability encounters that are based on traditional accountability. Perceptions of fairness in the workplace are a component of procedural justice identified by Greenberg (1990) as *interactive justice*. The term refers to “the fairness of the treatment an employee receives in the enactment of formal procedures or in the explanation of those procedures” (Niehoff and Moorman, 1993, p. 534). In this case, the formal procedure could be a performance review. Perceptions of fairness are also important in informal procedures, such as being called to account in front of others or not being given an opportunity to give an explanation or excuse.

For those working in controlling environments, there is a sense that social support is “not present enough.” The outcome of this social dynamic is a decreased willingness of members to form an in-depth commitment to being a highly responsible contributor to the organization.

Popular literature focuses on how corrective accountability is to be delivered by the person in authority. Whether traditional accountability includes politeness and an attempt to “deliver the good news first” or to sandwich the bad news between compliments, as some “how tos” suggest, does not eliminate the one-way attempt to “fix” the person-as-the-problem. Tetlock (1998) notes that empirical study suggests,

Accountability motivates people to be defensive—to think of reasons why they are right and potential critics are wrong. Both impression management and cognitive dissonance researchers have repeatedly documented the tendency for people to justify their conduct, especially when that conduct casts doubt on their competence or integrity and is public knowledge (p. 633).

As John Shotter (1993) states, “[I]f one feels oneself reduced as a person, one feels oneself as living in a reduced world” (p. xii). The prevalence of feeling “reduced as a person” suggests there is a need to revisit what accountability could be/really is in the workplace. The possibility of accountability being constructive and beneficial must be considered.

Traditional applications of accountability cannot be separated from the mechanistic form of organizational structure prominent in the 20th century. As an organizational form, traditional accountability is typically pyramidal, with the upper echelons practicing command and control and the subordinates working in the service of those in charge. With this thinking, it is useful to consider the critique by Anderson, et al (2001),

Such organizations are established as solid structure, pyramidal in form. Orders move from top to bottom, information is passed in the opposite direction. Participants function

as individuals in competition for upward movement. Firm boundaries separate the organization from the world outside (p. 8).

The emphasis on the proliferation of competition is noteworthy. The authors further suggest that we consider the following major challenges faced by structured organizations (p. 9). These challenges were also reflected in the conversations on accountability.

1. *Those in command attempt to establish a singular view of the organization, its goals, and the rational basis of its functioning.*

Multiple views and rationalities circulate both within and outside the organization. An attempt to establish a singular view of accountability pertinent to today's world was evident in the discussion of the performance plan and performance review by Linda Milanowski as well as her CEO's attempt to write values around "Things that Matter." Her statement that the company would have to re-visit the plan and review activities after re-writing the "Things That Matter" suggests a desire to designate the president's singular view as "the correct view."

2. *Top down control undermines the initiative of all those below to deliberate on the future of the organization.*

There was an emphasis on hierarchy in most of the conversations. Isabel Meyer made a discouraging statement when she said, "A Taylorist division of work is still very much in place in many (larger) organizations." Salmon, when talking about performance contracts and how accountability becomes explicit, said,

It works best when a manager and his/her direct reports, each year in the performance appraisal process produces their contract. [It is] explicitly written as measurable requiring a performance element so the manager and the employee have a very detailed discussion of what that means.

Inclusion of the membership in making decisions at a meaningful level appears to be infrequent. Representative of this is when Webster noted that there are times when the leadership group, in making a decision, uses a "stopgap measure" of going back and talking to their direct reports to find out what they think—to get a broader perspective. For many companies, it is not a routine activity of inclusion.

3. *Because the hierarchical structure heightens competition, individuals will tend to pass on only that information that favors themselves.*

Information can be a “commodity,” something to be hoarded or valued as important to gaining access to valued resources. In traditional accountability, the ability to avoid negative accountability may require withholding detrimental information that may bring a call to account. To look good in the eyes of leaders may require less than truthful responses when one falls short of perfection. People may be called to account because of assumptions that are faulty or misinformation that is received and not questioned, bringing “bad” results. Ongoing, open conversation did not occur. In a competitive climate the result is a confrontation either along the way or after the work has been completed. Ceremonies of traditional accountability (blame and shame) occur affecting relationships and future involvements.

4. *Diversification of functions generates ignorance of all that is not in one’s assigned realm. Decisions within functional units are often self-serving and are not coordinated with other functional groups.*

Functional units are often internally focused, not attentive to how their work affects other units, potentially causing difficulty and disconnection. The focus is on making the work easier from the standpoint of the unit or an individual in that unit without external consideration. The lack of conversation or concern for the work of other functional groups can damage relationships and productivity for all involved. Cultures often design the constraints on communication between areas creating functional gaps that hinder performance.

5. *A fixed organizational structure favors fixed flows of communication; differing perspectives may never confront each other.*

Stavros, in offering how accountability is generally perceived by organizational members, offered what he sees as the common viewpoint, “I am accountable to my supervisor. They tell me what to do and I am responsible for doing it.” Dagues suggested that in the old school, daily, there is very little interaction in organizations. Working in this highly “fixed” atmosphere reduces the flow of communication. Organizational units do not communicate except in formal meetings that limit conversation. Reports proliferate with abbreviated information. There is a sense that one

is vulnerable to some disciplinary action when stepping beyond the boundaries. This makes excessive documentation of what is done and not done important “to protect ourselves” in the minds of many. Unfortunately, a fixed, inflexible structure is normal in most of today’s organizations.

6. *A strict boundary definition, distinguishing between what is inside and what is outside the organization, separates the meaning-making process within the organization from the communities of meaning outside the walls.*

Some organizations run the risk of blindness toward the context of meaning on which their future depends. When strict boundaries exist inside organizations, as noted above, messages may be missed from outside the organization. Organization members could “bring in” messages that encourage innovation and stimulate organizational learning and growth. The organization stagnates. When members are afraid to challenge the status quo and ask the tough questions, the boundaries become impenetrable.

The components of traditional accountability highlight the elements that have long been prevalent in organizational leadership. There has been an underlying understanding that people must be controlled in order to get performance. Application in practice focuses on deficiency and calls for punishment when someone gets out of line. As suggested by Anderson, et al, a solid structure and pyramidal form creates major challenges for organizational—and member, effectiveness. As noted by Steele, “The punitive company becomes out of balance when it comes to how the company makes things happen and that is a problem.”

Attached in B, Table 1: Traditional Accountability, are highlighted statements made by participants related to key elements in the conversations on traditional accountability. They include (1) Confusion as to what accountability “is,” (2) As an act of control, (3) Individualized accountability, (4) A corrective tool and (5) Current methods are working or are CA. From my viewpoint, most of those statements are related to the pyramidal form of organizing.

The following segment offers the “components of constructive accountability.”

The Components of Constructive Accountability

Constructive accountability is a relational learning process, and, as a learning process, it is ongoing and generative. As opposed to the above form of *economic accountability*, CA could be called a form of *social accountability*, a term offered by Shotter (1984). “Social accountability” suggests, for me, levels of effective interaction that mutualize accountability. Gergen (1999) states, “Patterns of action are typically intertwined with modes of discourse” (p. 114). As people talk, they together imply and consider how action will be best accomplished. Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor (2004) suggest that an organization can be described “as a confederation of distant but not fully autonomous domains of practice and habits of talk” (p. 617). They also note that many different theorists are in agreement, such as the following (pp. 617-618):

- J. Krippendorff (1998) refers to talk as *an ecology of discourses*, differing domains of talk (objects, subject matter, vocabulary, context), each implying a community, institutions, and a boundary.
- L. Hawes (1999) says domains of language are used within a larger linguistic community characterized by special vocabularies and forms of expression—a *polyphonic world*, as suggested by Bakhtin (1981).
- H. Maturana (1997) suggests that organizing is, in effect, “intersecting networks of conversations” (p. 61).
- J. R. Taylor, C. Groleau, L. Heaton and E. J. Van Every (2001) use the analogy of computer programming to suggest local conversations as being *hyperlinked* with “links” being activated by the people who migrate between and participate in a variety of conversations.
- D. Boden (1994) borrows E. Goffman’s (1981) term comparing the organization to a *lamination of conversations*, with what she calls a “layering effect” whereby “decisions are *talked into* being in fine yet layered strips of interaction” (p. 51, some emphasis added).

Robichaud, et al (2004), state, "Language is fundamental to the sustaining of cooperative interaction: to the extent that social entities or organizations persist and evolve, they do so through the mediation of language" (p. 619). *In order to make sense—and to participate in accountability that is constructive—in organizations, people must successfully converse.* It is the natural venue for moving toward a mutually thought full future.

Jackins (1991) says, "*Learning consists of evaluating new information in relation to information which we have previously understood*" (p. 115, italics in text). Although not directly talking about accountability, Jackins also implies the relevance of constructive accountability to learning. He says,

A human being cannot learn in the real sense of the word if s/he is hurting, is overtired, depressed, frightened, embarrassed, ashamed, angry, confused or bored. A learner must be *feeling good* in order to really learn (p. 116, emphasis added).

This also reflects Frederickson's (2002), *build and broaden theory* of positive emotions, as noted in chapter 1. She says, "Positive emotions appear to *broaden* people's momentary thought-action repertoires and *build* their enduring personal resources" (p. 122, emphasis in text). *Constructive accountability is proposed as an ongoing pattern of relational processes and action that becomes possible during activities of cooperation, collaboration, strength enhancement and contribution in everyday work.*

As a collaborative activity, constructive accountability requires a reframing of the context and practice of accountability. A new but implicit **psychological contract** between members is required, one that encourages open, communal exchange and action. A new "agreement" is needed of what members at all levels must contribute to facilitate the survival of the organization. According to Rousseau (1995), "*Psychological contracts are beliefs, based upon*

promises expressed or implied, regarding an exchange agreement between an individual and, in organizations, the employing firm and its agents" (quoted in Rousseau, 2004, p. 120, italics in text). Rousseau adds, "Understanding and effectively managing these psychological contracts can help organizations thrive" (p. 120). Johann Roux suggests psychological contracts are really "relational contracts." He says, "Beliefs are constituted through relational action; these relational contracts are established through language as relational action" (personal communication). Additionally, psychological contracts include implied agreements regarding accountability. Effective contracts anticipate accountability that is fair and constructive.

Psychological contracts motivate (or de-motivate) people to contribute in ways that make a difference. They also include agreements about what is "owed" to others, a critical piece of how people work together. To work in an environment where the contract is limiting and punishing is de-motivating. Patterns of exchange and interaction activated within the contract "decide" how people behave towards each other and the commitments that members have to each other and the organization (Rousseau, 2004, p. 122-123). When accountability is perceived as limited to finding fault and punishment for non-compliance and non-performance, organizational members receive a signal that the leadership lacks commitment to them; a decrease in trust and belief usually follows. Since psychological contracts are "works in progress," ongoing exchanges that create/exemplify meaningful action are constructive (CA in action). These activities help create and sustain positive psychological contracts. Also according to Rousseau, there are multiple "contract makers" in organizations (managers, Human Resources, informal leaders, etc.) with responsibility for the messages that are sent to the members (2004, p. 125). All must be alert to the importance of sustaining healthy psychological contracts.

This concern with psychological contracts is a fitting preamble to a discussion of constructive accountability as enriched by the conversations on accountability with organizational executives. Let us turn, then, to these same components with regards to constructive accountability, making more evident the contrast in CA with their counterparts in traditional accountability.

The Underlying Understanding Component of Constructive Accountability

In accountability that is constructive, there is an *underlying understanding component* of what is to be achieved and why. Relationships and strength-based accountability is built into how **people work mutually to make sense**, communicate and accomplish together responsibly. Tom Dagues said, “No one has full control... When it is shared, which it usually is, then there is shared authority, shared accountability.” The underlying understanding of what accountability means influences the patterns of action and patterns of relating as well as the learning processes that are part of those everyday activities.

At the outset, the underlying understandings and expectations of CA include the sense that one is a partner in the process of accomplishment; that accountability is, as noted by Mario Marais, bi-directional. There is not an automatic attempt to look for what is “your fault” but to look for what can be done together to make things work. Attempts are made to locate what is presumed as “the best accurate” solution(s) while referencing present knowledge/understandings, past choices, standards and experiences that are alterable.

According to Hinricks, “To locate what is presumed as ‘the best accurate solution’ requires us first to attend to sensemaking” (personal communication). Sensemaking, according to Weick, is to engage in ongoing conversation (1995, p. xi). It is to notice something, match the new information with what is already known or suspected, reflect on what is considered, gain the

input of others (if there is time to get input), make a decision, take action and then to look back on it to see if what was decided really made sense—and to continue in conversation.

In recent decades new theories and practices are emphasizing the positive, relational spaces between people. The language of “community” is becoming more evident (Seiling, 1997, p.4). These developments recognize **the essentialness of relationships** in making accomplishment possible. No longer is top management seen as the sole source of the final decision. The ability of leaders to “know” and make sense of the day-to-day operations of the company is coming into question. It is those who are doing the work, designing new products, seeking out customers and coming up with innovative ways to produce current products more efficiently that must be brought into the sensemaking process. It is also in these spaces that the communal practices of CA must be recognized, encouraged and proliferated.

Organizations and people in Western cultures have historically emphasized individuality and action. There has been a lack of appreciation of conversation. Yet conversation is a generative activity creating opportunities for moving toward understanding while creating the space for locating new meanings. Organizational climate is always changing, thus conversation is essential for locating alternatives and “turns in the road.” Gergen and Gergen’s (2004) definition of social construction as “the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities” (p. 7) suggests the movement that occurs through conversation. Within conversation people are constantly creating new understandings of what is happening around them and what actions are now possible and effective.

One organization that reflects such change is Norwood Tool. In the six years Jones has been there, he has attempted to change how people talk together, helping them believe they have permission to say what they have to say and to do it without concern for ramifications. He

learned the value of doing so in an organization where open communication was not part of the culture. Jones' answers to my questions were laced with stories and examples of what and how "we" do things at Norwood. As an example, he said,

We are experimenters. When an area is not doing well, we go and work with the people and we all figure out why. Yes, we have people that will always be grumblers and complainers, but they will be worked around. Sometimes they even say things we should all hear. And sometimes, they even change.

There are many reasons why the old understanding of accountability must be discarded as an artifact of the past. In its place, Jones inadvertently described the sense of safety called for as part of constructive accountability as follows:

As members of this organization, it is safe to contribute at our best, collaborate and be together in making sense of what performance and accomplishment is for others, my organization and myself. Together we make things happen by relating in ways that create open, ongoing conversations, effective outcomes and positive accountability.

This movement toward community, as early on suggested by McNamee, cannot occur without a person sensing that a new form of metaconversation regarding accountability exists. This new metaconversation emphasizes a form that makes positive conversations, sensemaking, circumstances and outcomes possible. This metaconversation places CA inside the process of everyday work. As noted by Salmon,

CA is going beyond just self to a willingness to engage the self in supporting the whole. That is deep. The **exchange process**, these emerging conversations, are focused on the continual process of creating, re-creating and constructing the world we work in, it is a continuous cycle, it is never finished. If people have willingness and an interest in self-improvement, then this process gives them a framework in which to exercise that.

The exchange process is fundamental to creating relationships that nurture learning and expand the underlying understanding of accountability. As noted by Meyer,

In terms of interaction, it [CA] will deepen the quality of exchanges between people and provide a platform within which individuals are continually learning from each other and continually questioning and updating their own assumptions as to what is right, wrong and appropriate in the context of what the organization as a whole is attempting to achieve.

When an underlying understanding of what CA exists, informal, ongoing, collaborative accountability is part of partnering together. The occurrence of end accountability is lessened. New patterns of relationship emerge to create a stronger sense of being together beneficially and safely.

The Application in Practice Component of Constructive Accountability

There is an *application in practice component* from which those who practice constructive accountability draw in day-to-day activities. Patterns of action emerge from the understandings of how ongoing, relational activities of accountability must occur inside everyday work. Significant to the application of CA is the language used and how that language leads to future action. The language-in-use creates the outcomes of conversing in which we engage with others. The language-in-use also constitutes the politics of being together and the actions that result. Relationships are constituted by the **collaborative practice** of talking and acting together. So it is also through agreed on language that people create, describe and advance the benefits of constructive accountability as an ongoing process of working and accomplishing well together.

In referring to the above discussion on “responsibility,” it would be pertinent to ask the question: What does it look like to be responsible in a constructively accountable organization? Or, how does one “be responsible” in collaborative practice? The word (language of)

“responsibility” itself is from the Latin, “I answer” (*respondeo*). The “I” puts the meaning in the primacy of the unitary person. To make the adjustment to CA, “I” must be moved to what Lannamann (1999) notes as Shotter’s (1984) “socially constructed agent” or the “social I” (p. 87). Individual responsibility (and accountability), according to Lannamann, “is always, necessarily, a social construction, one that plays a central role in the production of joint action” (p. 87). This places the responsibility for accountability into the domain of the collective person, what was referred to above as the “social I.” The “social I” in a collaborative environment works from a frame of being answerable (as in the Latin definition) for one’s own role as a collective person in maintaining a collaborative stance. To do otherwise is to be irresponsible, possibly not able to be constructively accountable—not able to be part of the production of joint action.

In reframing accountability as constructive, there are a number of linguistic practices promising potential. Among these I would include the following:

- **Account Offering:** Activities of willingly offering an account to another or others as a place to start discussion regarding an activity or concern.
- **Account Exchanging:** Together taking the account to others to further assess and co-construct a new or extended form of (or verification of) the account. This would include activities of *account checking* in order to make the best sense (considering/re-visioning/making adjustments/keeping/changing/reframing/eliminating) of the offered account, potentially but not necessarily leading to agreement and action.
- **Account Advancing:** Those participating in account exchanging take their agreement(s) to a larger venue, to interested others. This advances the information to others, eliminating the secrecy element. These activities invite participation in another account exchange regarding what has been offered.

Let us examine each of these practices more fully.

Account Offering

“Offerings” are open-ended, casual or purposeful invitations to another (others) to question, make statements, and offer suggestions and to openly consider what is being offered. Ideally, offerings are purposely made based on the evidence of relationship. This offering affirms that the other person(s) has something to contribute to the development of an effective thought or action. Offering involves an account of a perspective or action under consideration and what is needed or desired, as well as a request for input. To make the request invites others inside one’s work while seeking input, clarification and enrollment in an idea or cause.

Involvement and collaboration, as strength-based activities, call for the location of the strengths of others in the process of co-construction. However, attempting to understand perspectives different from one’s own can be a struggle. Elston emphasized this when talking about feedback:

I guess I feel strongly that if people whose opinion I value are giving me feedback on something, I care about it; it is a gift. If it is [someone] I don’t value and I don’t understand why they are giving it at all, on something I don’t care about, it is a waste of both of our time.

And yet constructive accountability asks us to willingly seek the strengths and examine the viewpoints of others. This requires us to openly and willingly consider, even take on, the perspectives of others. This also includes, after consideration of the other’s offering, the opportunity to turn away. However, according to Parker and Axtell (2001), little research has been done in the organizational area on perspective taking (p. 1085). Perspectives are often reflected in the language and action of others. Actions and outcomes of one become intertwined with the actions and outcomes of others in the interdependent systems in workplaces. The assumption that the actions of all workplace members are meshed is valid. When individuals are

unwilling to consider the perspectives and influencing gestures of others, conflict occurs. The potential for healthy relationships and honest perspective consideration increases when open interaction occurs.

The positive effect of account offering is based on building relationships with participants and broadening the possibility of expanded outcomes. Trudell places responsibility with the leadership for enabling an organizational environment where constructive learning (and account offering) encounters can occur. She states,

The organization needs to create an environment and an operating structure so they understand there is interdependency. Encounters must be constructive instead of destructive. Sharing information and giving viewpoints must be possible.

Knowledge is exchanged. Productive and innovative outcomes become more possible when account offering is seen and experienced as constructive. The strength of conflictive exchange is lessened, even as it is appreciated as important to the examination of what is offered.

Account offering legitimizes the sense of “not knowing enough” and the validity of inviting others into the conversation. Going beyond that, even if one senses that “I know,” the account offering aspect gives permission to check, to make sure, to adjust and to share accountability. It confirms and seeks affirmation when uncertainty is present. It allows one to be safe in the knowledge that it is “ok” to be uncertain. It brings more effective discussion into the mix of the meeting instead of having it occur in the hall after the potentially less effective decision has been made.

Ideally, account offering would include a *reflective* and *projective* sensemaking process, a looking backward and forward. The *reflective process* includes looking back, comparing, re-examining and potentially reconstructing. There is an exchange of assumptions, concerns and

knowledge. This brings new interpretations and then possibly re-interpretation. Schon (1982) sees the entire process of reflection as “central to the ‘art’ by which practitioners sometimes deal well with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict” (p. 50). Of course, one has to be aware that the reflective component can seem so compelling and so valid that it may forestall productive projective thinking.

The *projective process* of account offering also allows participants to look forward, to offer solutions, and to consider outcomes, ramifications and benefits of what is being considered. As noted above, in the reflective process, both before and during the offering, the offerer contemplates, attempting to make sense of what has been heard, read and learned in the past. The projective process considers what it might mean now and in the future. Considering the future suggests the question: Is what I am thinking possible or probable? Offering these contemplations for others to consider opens opportunities for further learning for the participants.

Account offering **occurs continuously** in organizations. It is stopping someone in the hall to “run by” something on the mind of the offerer. The need to create opportunities to offer accounts that create streams of learning is often left out of decision-making. To do so ignores the need to process “good sense” prior to making decisions or taking action. Account offering moves easily into account exchanging when the other person(s) becomes engaged in the discussion.

Account Exchanging

Seeking information from others, carrying forward unique or new information, absorbing information provided in concert with others constitutes the natural dynamics of account exchanging. It is calling someone on the phone to ask a question and then going deeper into the conversation to clarify what is being said in order to perpetuate the discussion. It is talking over

lunch about something and discovering it is relevant to something else that was not included in the conversation originally. It is willingly expanding a meeting agenda to include further pertinent, unconsidered discoveries. A climate conducive to account exchanging will create new or expand existing relationships. New learning opportunities develop and competencies expand. All parties are enriched through the process.

To achieve effective account exchanging requires participants to overcome the limitations of protectiveness and insecurity that are present in traditional forms of accountability. Breaking down those barriers brings participants to build participative relationships. The space is created for more automatic exchanges of information and opinions. People learn to recognize the benefits of open communication and understand the need for relational connections and partnerships. In the process, participants may exchange propositions, raise and examine doubts, identify and consider alternatives, argue constructively, discover insights. The process of exchanging accounts is significant to the outcome.

There are **strengthening elements**, visible and invisible, present when constructive accountability becomes part of the process of responsible interaction between members. The visible elements would include behavior, styles of interaction, collaboration and cooperation, writing, accepted language, skills (as applied), acted-on rules and procedures, etc., creating the interlocking behaviors of association. The invisible elements would include values, vision, assumptions, paradigms, responsibilities, personal and organizational goals, hidden or withheld skills and organizational culture, etc. Both the visible and invisible elements, and how people interact in the workplace, influence the group's collective activities and relationships. It is also within the exchange of these visible and invisible elements, based on positive relationships with others, that constructive accountability is co-constructed and practiced. Through these activated

relationships CA becomes embedded in organizational practice. As patterns of coordination, a strong component of the social context exists within these strengthening elements.

We are deluding ourselves if we expect our “conversing” to follow certain rules of “how to do it right.” The ebb and flow of exchange within conversations creates opportunities for sensemaking, decisioning and relationship building; all are essential to the social aspects of organizing. As noted by Lee Salmon, these conversations “become construction conversations.”

It is within account exchanging that sensemaking through narrative is facilitated. The role of narration in organizational communication and sensemaking is now widely accepted (Robichaud et al, 2004, p. 619). As noted by Freedman and Combs (1996), “Speaking isn’t neutral or passive” (p. 29). Narratives provide a medium for capturing the past, linking it to the present and projecting it into the future. As participants negotiate the narratives of organizational life, they create new questions and new possibilities that call for considerations, estimates and forecasts. As noted by Heirs and Perhrson (1977),

For effective action we need “information” about the *future* as well... not merely rely normally on simple extrapolations from past and present information. The past, present and created *future* information that has been gathered must be *reassembled* into alternatives which seem best adapted to answering the question. It is during this reassembling effort that a great deal of creative thinking takes place as the *interrelationships* of all the assembled information are consciously sought in order to produce alternative answers... (p. 15, emphasis in text).

Account exchanging is the place where creative and innovative thinking occurs; it is a place, as noted above, where information is reassembled into best alternative scenarios. Although creative thinking often occurs in the “collective mind” of the person, it is in the dynamic exchanges among organizational members that innovation moves to reality and action.

Account Advancing

The move into account advancing is essential to constructive accountability. It is the activity of taking the accounts beyond those involved in the exchange to open discussion within the larger group. Account advancing includes sharing the agreements and/or concerns identified during the account exchange activity and the communication of the acceptance or rejection of information under consideration. This does not necessarily imply a full understanding or agreement has been reached. As the fruits of exchange are shared, there may be even more complexity revealed in the issues being examined.

In account advancing, having two or more voices in sharing/advancing knowledge and opinion is especially important when new others are not fully aware of what is being offered. As with account exchanging, the messengers again enter into the process of offering and exchanging information. The cycle begins again each time there is a new audience.

An important element of account advancing is the research reported on the *common knowledge hypothesis* (Gigone and Hastie, 1993). This hypothesis suggests that the relevance of information and/or the amount of serious consideration given to new information is related to how many are familiar with the information *prior to discussion*. The research notes that previously unshared, unique information, whether significant or not, does not automatically impact the thinking of the group. This suggests that the presence of healthy relationships is vital to consideration. The presence of constructive arguing in CA also contributes to the facilitation of effective advancing of accounts. Effective account advancing would include:

- (1) Serious consideration by those it is being offered to.
- (2) Social validation by others, which is significant to the willingness of the messenger(s) to continue to offer information.
- (3) Repetition and focus by determined voices.

- (4) An awareness that novel/unexpected messages may be heard as threatening, particularly if there is a seriously considered decision already at hand (adapted from Stasser, 1999, pp. 60-61).

Once an explanation has taken hold, it will contain “self-sealing logic” (Weick, 1995, p. 84). Any other information to the contrary may be seen as delusional. The hypothesis emphasizes that the amount of expertise and/or the relationship status of the messengers can bias the willingness of those listening to the advanced account (Stasser, 1999, p. 61). This makes the practice of CA relevant to the successful communication of difficult issues. Unfortunately, without the operation in practice of offering and exchanging making it possible to “grease” the wheels of the collective mind, advancement may be stymied. The combination of a “complex” idea and a lack of understanding, according to the hypothesis, will eliminate consideration.

In account advancing, those present have a **shared role in creating the environment and circumstances** of consideration. Along this line, as noted by Steele, those listening to messages make choices as to how or if they will respond, be part of and/or extend the account advancing process. When one participates in exchanging and advancing knowledge about what is advanced and what is at stake, his or her sense of vulnerability is potentially increased or decreased. Providing information about what resources are available to the person (or people) offering the previously unheard message is important to addressing this sense of vulnerability. Engaging with others before and/or after the main discussion is, according to Webster, important.

I think there could be a lot of positives that would come out of [CA]. It [would be] open season to have off line conversations and collect more data and do more research through asking other people questions and what not.

With greater social and personal resources, members are typically more stable during stressful times. Account advancing brings others into the design of what can and is to be done to address the circumstances and situations. Of course, account offering, exchanging and advancing are often done with a sense of urgency. As noted by Jones, going to the person(s) and holding a standup meeting with those involved can address issues “before they blow up.”

Thus, an added element in advancing messages to others might be:

- (5) A shared willingness to stay in conversation in order to reach clarity on what has been advanced.

Within account offering, account exchanges and account advancing elements of the application in practice component, questions (inquiries) and considerations are exchanged, sensemaking and decisions are articulated, and joint action becomes possible. Members offer their work to others, learn what others consider important and how it impacts their own work. As a result, *members become implicitly and/or explicitly part of each other's efforts and outcomes*; they become mutually aware of and contribute to the circumstances of the other's work. Thus, they become, as noted by Webster, mutually accountable.

The willingness of members to offer, exchange and advance accounts generate what Barrett calls **collaborative competence** (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003, p. 182). Collaborative competence is the ability to engage in ongoing conversations that include the exchange of diverse perspectives, articulating concerns, actively exchanging information and the use of what I call, as noted above, “constructive arguing.” Constructive arguing is productive—and, at times, provocative. Conflict exists in all relationships and cannot be eliminated. People offer and exchange strong points and standby them because arguing is based on beliefs held by the participants, bringing out knowledge, experiences and positions of the arguers. But arguing

does not have to be disruptive. The awareness that personal beliefs, when exchanged in constructive ways, can be productive and beneficial is important to collaborative competence.

Webster suggests that there are two sides to the willingness to address issues and concerns. I would also add that these two sides are important to the ability to have collaborative competence. He said,

There are two sides to this. One is the willingness to bring our emotions to the table and the other side is the willingness to accept the outcome [and] the consequences. From an HR perspective I might have a really strong certain course of action that we should take but there is a need for us to process. I have to be willing to recognize or see the world and the decision a little differently after hearing the dialogue regarding all the issues that are surrounding it. *I have to be willing to give in. I have to be willing to let go* (emphasis added).

Collaborative competence highlights the *recursive nature* present in talking about and applying constructive accountability in organizations. Recursivity suggests that a process is enfolded into other processes. Recursivity also includes the same conversational procedures that operationalize the co-construction of accountability (offering, exchanging and advancing accounts). These activities are present in embedding the process in the culture of the organization. This suggests that to talk about, represent or “act as if” a process is acceptable and appropriate is to socially validate its existence. As others use the language and co-create a narration of CA as reasonable, new sets of *rules of practicality* (what is seen collectively as practical) and *levels of typicality* (what is seen collectively as typical) (Quinn, 1996, p. 381) come into being.

In summary, the application in practice component of CA includes the purposeful and intentional involvement of members in relationships that calls others into making sense and moving toward outcomes that are beneficial and constructive to be involved.

The Social Patterning Component of Constructive Accountability

The *social patterning component* of constructive accountability facilitates the interactions and actions of the people in a social structure; it also emphasizes the acceptability of the person(s) performing an activity within the culture of an organization. These co-constructed patterns design the appropriateness of behavior and action. Thus, the social context of an organization includes the dynamics of the culture in which people work and the means by which they cope together over time.

The social patterns of constructive conversations, the language used and the learning and sustaining of connected conversations creates and supports or diminishes working relationships and outcomes. It is within informative conversations in a social structure that constructions emerge concerning what is considered to be right and wrong, good and bad, effective and ineffective, successful and unsuccessful, and in the gray areas between. It is also within constructive conversations that people decide how an organization will “do business” both internally and externally. It is within these conversations that order and disorder shape the context of the organization. According to Gubrium and Holstein (2000), “Accounts or descriptions of a setting constitute that setting while they are simultaneously being shaped by the contexts they constitute” (p. 491).

As there is an intermingling of the three components, much of what might be included in the social patterning component of CA has been included above in the underlying understanding and application components. Yet there is much to be said about the dynamics within the social

action and practice of CA. These dynamics include mutuality instead of control, natural flow instead of ceremonies of accountability, continuous learning instead of stagnation and conversation instead of confrontation.

Mutuality instead of Control

According to the Webster's Dictionary, mutuality is experienced or performed by two or more with respect to the other or others; reciprocal; having in common; an exchange of some kind between persons. Salmon stated, "It [CA] is going beyond just self and goes to a willingness to engage the self in supporting the whole. That is deep." Thus, mutuality in CA includes the exchange of strengths making it possible to work cooperatively and collaboratively. Expanded competence is the outcome of the mutuality of wisdom, action and exchange.

Mutuality allows people to test rules, question processes, challenge the status quo, appear to step out of line, to address issues of concern—and to do it in ways that may not always be appreciated. People more often look for understanding or overlook out-of-the-norm responses and behaviors within the experience of mutuality, yet much is also expected of each other. Mutuality calls for collaboration instead of competition. As noted by Trudell, "People have to believe that you need others to get things done."

Control often includes the use of traditional, after-the-fault accountability; it does not include the benefits of exchange that are part of the mutuality of CA. Because of the element of control, *traditional accountability decreases mutuality*. There are natural barriers to accountability that are perceived as appropriate.

In mutuality, **participants collaborate through relational processes** that yield ideas, innovation and action. As suggested earlier, mutuality creates opportunities for diverse thoughts and actions to be coordinated in ways that produce outcomes that cannot possibly be created or

claimed alone. This suggests that control of each person and localization of “the expert” or “the knower” is problematic and undesirable. Mutuality is essential for collaboration and cooperation.

As noted by Peters and Armstrong (1998), “Collaboration means that people labor together in order to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration, something that does not and cannot fully exist in the lives of individuals” (p. 75). Their statement suggests the desirability of the social construction of mutual agreements and activities. The outcome is more than one participating individual could hope to construct. It is in these activities of mutuality that one learns from others and later acts on those learnings.

Natural Flow instead of “Ceremonies of Accountability”

In sometimes-contradictory ways, there is a natural flow toward sense in the conversations and activities of CA. Agreement and disagreement both contribute to the flow. In practicing CA, members seek information when needed and offer suggestions without being asked. Status and title are not obstacles to these accountability activities. More casual activities become typical, rather than exceptions; they occur routinely within the work of working. The expectation of being part of the work of others calls for these interactions to occur. This natural flow of accountability is in sharp contrast to the *ceremonies of traditional accountability* that occur when something has gone wrong inside traditional accountability practices. Steele gave an example as to how CA often occurs at Hunter Douglas:

Something is not working right and you want to get together and look at this thing and say, you know this could be better, what is our end goal, what is our vision for the future of that product? It is happening in the here and now. People will start to bring up previous experiences and saying if we could do it this way or switch to that, those types of things. I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members. I don’t think of it as accountability, I think of it as fun, brainstorming, but it is

a form of accountability in that there is an expectation to resolve that issue. Things are not over when we leave. The discussion was a collaborative exchange but the end result hasn't happened yet. You have that collaboration and the activity takes place later. Whatever I do, the rest of the team is [also] responsible for that.

In this instance, a CA conversation occurred and the people present were aware of the need to participate in the conversation in order to resolve the issue. His statement, "I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members" and that "**things are not over when we leave**" acknowledges that accountability exists inside the activity and continues beyond the conversation. It was also an example of the "ongoing" conversational nature of CA. These *thinking conversations* embrace the mutuality of CA and how it adds to the provision of learning during a collaborative exchange as well as the action following the exchange.

The natural flow of CA calls for collaboration and cooperation instead of blame. When something goes wrong, people work together to address what has happened. Yet the natural flow of CA is also preemptive, addressing issues and concerns *before* something goes amiss. The question is, "What can we do?" a natural flow statement, instead of "You did it," after the fault, ultimately starting a ceremony of traditional accountability.

Continuous Learning instead of Stagnation

Organizations are constituted as the collective person engages in conversations of learning with other collected persons while being part of what Sugarman (2001) calls "attending to business" (p. 74). Constructive accountability of necessity supports the expansion of skills and beneficial attitudes, thus broadening and building the core learnings of an organization. As stated by Burns, "[CA] would have a good chance of **improving attitudes and perceptions** within the organization." Useful learning activities are an extension of positive attitudes—and positive learning attitudes are an extension of learning activities.

Continuous learning is important to the “ongoingness” of CA. *Constructive accountability is a learning and sustaining process.* Activities that include account offering, account exchanging and account advancing of necessity include openness to listening to and learning from others. Learning new skills and openly considering previously unconsidered skills and understandings with others adjusts attitudes, expands sensemaking and enhances action.

According to Scribner’s research (1984) on *activity theory*, people adjust and adapt their skills according to the influence of contextual factors in the workplace, noting that contextual factors would strongly influence how people learn and adapt their skills on the job (noted in Torraco, 2002, p. 447-449). Activity theory suggests that providing opportunities to expand skills and knowledge advances contribution and the motivation (attitudes) to apply those skills. Regarding CA, Burns “wasn’t sure” what skills would be involved in the application of CA. He said,

The skill itself would be doing CA conversations. That in and of itself would be a skill in problems solving and communication. That in itself could build skills. It would happen one participant at a time.

Skills are underutilized unless the desire to apply them exists. Stagnation occurs when skills are ignored, underutilized, not scrutinized, not upgraded or not used by personal choice. Negative attitudes soon follow. Salmon suggested,

The question is whether the person has a positive attitude, a willingness to see how they may act in a more consistent and constructive manner that supports the whole organization and what it has set out to be accountable for.

Good skills and positive attitudes are hampered less when contributive choices have been made. As suggested by Sadighi, “It is really a fundamental choice as to whether you want to see it [CA]

and be part of it.” CA activities can support the creation of a context where people choose to have a positive attitude. The natural flow of CA is dependent on the social patterning component of the organization and the desire of the participants to contribute to that natural flow.

Conversation instead of Confrontation

How people actively and successfully talk is the strongest element of developing patterns of positive coordination within CA. Conversing activities, whether casual or purposeful, are building blocks of organizing for members at all levels of the organization. As people talk, they discuss (make sense of) what is to be decided, built on, resisted, reconsidered and saved in the memory of the group or organization. As noted by Cotter and Cotter (1999),

Talk is how we most effectively take action with each other to coordinate our relating so that meaning, values, and our myriad of social behaviors and efforts can evolve and be shaped in the directions we prefer (p. 169).

People ask simple and complex questions that may not have simple or universal answers. In the best of situations, the mental-models-in-use are reinforced or challenged by the input of others. CA conversations also carry offerings, demands, healthy doubt, convictions, ownership and motivation that expose new discussions for use in sensemaking activities. These activities in turn lead to what is seen as beneficial and strengthening aspects of action or inaction.

Wisdom cannot happen in a vacuum. It occurs in the process of “individual” reflection and in thinking conversations with others. In Steele’s example above, people were called together to discuss alternatives. These wisdom-altering exchanges allow for what Langer (1997) calls “sideways learning” (p. 23). Such learning requires times when people are together considering practicalities and possibilities. According to Salmon, “The exchange process provides an opportunity for people to step forward, to learn and change behavior.” It is also in

the exchange process of conversations that people “size up” what is happening and consider potential consequences and outcomes.

Social patterns of CA evolve when elements of the interaction and relationship are present. Inside these conceptions of CA are social patterns of...

- Cooperation and collaboration [that supports...]
- The development of joint knowledge and action, conviction and continuous learning that is flexible and inviting [suggesting...]
- A knowledge that to succeed people must be supportive of others [while demonstrating...]
- The desire to perform in ways that reflect exchanges of respect and acceptance.

I see accountability that is constructive as an element of how we continually create our realities in the workplace. We coconstruct the “truths” inside our work and in life in general. Constructive accountability assumes that we cannot accomplish alone and, therefore, we are not reasonably fully accountable alone. It is with others that we create and exist. Therefore, **it is with others that accountability occurs constructively**. (See Appendix B, Table 2: Comments on Constructive Accountability, for highlights of participant comments on constructive accountability.)

Chapter 5

Moving Toward Constructive Accountability

Members themselves determine what accountability looks like.
Everybody determines what he or she wants it to look like.
Todd Steele

As first outlined in Chapter 1, the major objectives of this study were:

- (1) As first outlined in Chapter 1, the major objectives of this study were: To develop a conception of accountability that is both constructive and collaborative, and to illuminate a range of organizational practices that would realize this conception in action.
- (2) To explore the potential of constructive accountability for increasing the involvement and contribution of members to the organization, and ultimately the efficacy of the organization.
- (3) To develop and expand the idea that constructive accountability, when understood, appreciated and activated, can contribute to personal well-being and to a positive organizational culture.
- (4) To expand, even change, the perception and thinking instrumental to the practice and experience of accountability.

The conversations and the deliberations provoked by my dialogue with organizational executives contributed significantly toward fulfillment of the first three goals. A concept of constructive accountability was offered and acknowledged. Each respondent considered and, for the most part, valued the potential for increased involvement and effectiveness of their members through CA. They felt, if part of the culture of organizations, CA would contribute to the welfare of the organization and the personal well-being and contribution of the members. Several noted, either

directly or indirectly, that to change the conception of accountability would positively impact organizational culture. The thoughts and explanations of the interviewees expanded significantly my ideas of accountability.

The fourth goal was only partially accomplished. For the participants, the conversations did offer “thinking time” on the possibility of accountability being an exchange. There seemed to be little meaningful change, however, in the perception of accountability as an ongoing process of interaction. Yet, this one short conversation with the participants did appear to stir curiosity about the concept. Some believed in and currently seek active involvement by organizational members at all levels and yet accountability seemed to be outside that venue. Several did agree, however, that there are currently unrecognized CA behaviors already present in organizations. Some may have seen the concept of CA as a justification for their current practices of leadership. The concept expanded their thinking regarding the relevance of involvement, collaboration and participation in accountability. Steele seemed to “go deeper” into the understanding of CA, at one point chastising himself for “slipping back into the old form of accountability.”

Within the conversations, there was some agreement on the potential of what CA could offer. As each conversation progressed, with only a few exceptions, the participants became more open to the prospect of moving accountability forward into the relationships required to do the best work possible. As noted above, participants see CA as beneficial and contributive, making such statements as the following:

- It would help people to step forward.
- [Leaders] could take a vacation and not worry.

- If people have willingness and an interest in self-improvement then this process gives them a framework in which to exercise that.
- It helps change the victim thing.
- I believe an understanding of this whole concept creates a freedom—it gets people more freedom.
- It applies in personal and family relationships, parent and child relationships, the same as it applies in organizations.
- It could help keep the morale in a corporation moving in a positive direction.

This chapter opens discussion regarding CA being a practical way of working together asking, “How can organizations move toward a future where CA is part of everyday work?” Also included are some of the impediments to moving toward CA in organizations. The concept of CA as a “movement” is offered, suggesting how CA can be taken into organizations as a recognizable and contributive part of the way to work effectively and collaboratively. The prospect is to move toward a culture of accountability that is constructive and beneficial for all participants.

Naming Accountability as Constructive

“Naming” or labeling is important to acceptance and identification of a new or reframed concept. According to Wright and Lopez (2002),

To label is to give a name to things grouped together according to a shared characteristic(s). Because labels stand for something, they are abstractions. They organize and simplify the world and seemingly make it more understandable (p. 27).

Once a new behavior or activity is named and the name becomes part of language, people more easily recognize “what it is” when they see it or consider practice. With this recognition people

can more often see themselves performing in this way and can purposely choose to do so as part of performance. Eventually, it becomes part of unconscious actions. The naming “gives permission” to act in certain ways. And yet, according to Mary Gergen (1999), “Even when words remain intact linguistically, they can shift their meanings considerably” (p. 105). As with the original anglican meaning of “a survey,” as called for by William I, the term accountability has changed over time. An example of the struggle of changing the label of the term accountability to a constructive mode was present in the discussion of the naming of constructive accountability. Two of the participants suggested the name is a possible barrier to acceptance based on the “bag and baggage” of the traditional form of accountability. Sadighi said, “I sort of struggle with the phrase but the definition makes sense so I accept it.” From the same organization, Steele said,

I guess I am saying that the connotation of accountability is negative. Let’s call it something else so we don’t have to overcome that perception of individual accountability... Accountability has been drummed into your head since you were a child. You are accountable for knowing the laws. It is driven into your head. Constructive accountability is a collaborative effort.

Moving the meaning to a constructive stance is seen as difficult. And yet, the language of CA can contribute to a climate of transformation. I was even more convinced through the conversations that the design elements of CA depend on the language and processes that enhance and construct positive activities of accountability. Thus, the naming and identification with the language used becomes significant to living CA.

I must also note that altering a name and adjusting meaning does not necessarily cause a change in behavior. A shift in language does not automatically cause a change in culture or eliminate certain kinds of speech and action. People must sense the organization is serious and

that the shift is meaningful. Weick (1995) states that, “Language transformation can be a pathway to behavioral transformation. But to see this, we have to pay attention to substance as well as process” (p. 109). In order to make new possibilities real, to make it part of action, it is necessary to reach a communal understanding and to take action on that understanding. Collaborative action by those compelling the change goes beyond linguistics and semantics. Related action gives the words legitimacy. For me, reaching understanding of CA includes: (1) a comparison to past experiences of accountability through recognizable language, (2) examining how those experiences relate to the offered new meanings and (3) having the hope that the new projected realities will become real.

My purpose in retaining “accountability” as language is to retain the “accounts” process by describing it as offering, exchanging and advancing—inside the daily work of working. Leaders and theorists have been attempting to move accountability forward into the work for generations. Using the word “constructive,” I feel, moves the meaning forward while notably maintaining the recognizability and validity of the term. I claim the following as stated by Boje, Oswick and Ford (2004), as further justification for creation of this language in practice.

Language is not only content; it is also context and a way to recontextualize content. We do not just report and describe with language; we also create with it. And what we create in language “uses us” in that it provides a point of view (a context) within which we “know” reality and orient our actions (p. 571).

Positive Practices that Reflect CA

The conversations on accountability showed that the language of constructive accountability is not alien—but the awareness of accountability as relational and constructive in practice is not present. CA currently exists in some forms of practice in many organizations, although these activities are not notably recognized as “accountability.” Identifying already existent

applications can bring these activities into the light and expand the awareness and practice of CA.

Wortham (2001), states, “[T]he meaning of words is traced to the active relationships in which they play a part” (p. 128). Thus, in my view, the language of constructive accountability can, as noted by Boje, et al, above, “provide a point of view.” Organizations can use this point of view to create a new approach to accountability by orienting actions around the language that re-contextualizes accountability.

Interestingly, bringing this viewpoint (language and context) of accountability into the light honors and values existing taken-for-granted “realities.” Trudell believes that CA already occurs in organizations and yet one must visualize it to see it. She also said, “I think if the leadership [were] sensitized to constructive accountability and the power of this approach to accountability, they would be more willing to create that environment.” The experience of noticing and acknowledging obscure and previously undefined activities of accountability as constructive expands their existence and effectiveness enabling them to be nurtured and developed more fully. The following practices are earmarked as contributions to constructive accountability:

- *The willingness to contribute to others’ projects.*

Examples: In an information technology organization a co-worker recognized a co-member’s urgent need to address a problem for a client and worked with her to identify what needed to be done. In a service organization, a marketing representative requested help from someone outside the department in designing a process that invited and supported important customers in serving their own customers.

- *Cooperation and collaboration.*

Example: As noted by Steele, “What you are talking about is collaboration. I also understand [a] component of the accountability portion is that you are expecting me to do what I’m supposed to do so we can all hit that end goal.” An organization member in a

manufacturing organization sought resources to address a problem, and approached an organizational leader for the funding of those resources. He found knowledge that, joined with his, identified an innovative way to address the issue without extensive funding.

- *Asking questions and making suggestions.*

Example: An organization member working on the floor in a manufacturing organization heard that a new machine was being considered for installation in his area. He approached the engineers and asked pertinent questions about whether the equipment would really meet the need. His willingness to ask the questions and the engineers' willingness to invite him into the process led to the purchase of a more effective and less costly machine. The cost to the organization was substantially lowered.

- *Spontaneous conversations with others providing information or reports on experience.*

Example: When attempting to identify the best resources for working on a project, an administrator informally sought information from various sources such as peers, outside experts, online information, etc., to meet the needs of the group. During a spontaneous conversation over lunch, a valuable resource not previously considered was identified.

- *Checking with others to see how a decision will affect their work.*

Example: When considering the elimination of a report, the accounting department in a centralized organization checked with current recipients of the report to see if the information was available from other sources or if the report should be kept or adjusted to meet additional needs. The report was eliminated and the needs of the receivers were still met.

- *Adding people across an organizational slice as part of the design and application of new processes.*

Example: An organization started with a few members and then involved others across the organization in the process of culture change. The expanded involvement created a foundation for change in the organization.

- *Listening with respect and offering collaborative openness by a leader.*

Example: A leader asked a person in the packing area "what is going on" and what suggestions she would make to keep production moving. She suggested changes eliminating bottlenecks that made her job and that of others more productive.

- *Recognizing the importance of leaders at all levels as important when changing the culture of the organization.*

Example: A service company initiated a quality process. Including a top member of the organization, the president of the union, three union members and three management members as leaders/designers of the process, made it more likely that the process would be successful.

- *Considering all types of information.*

Example: Measurement and “facticity” is not left behind. Coupled with subjective information, there are times when measurement is essential and not to be ignored. In a manufacturing organization, the measurement of product scrap, outcomes and customer comments provides information significant to the ability and opportunity to improve.

In the conversations on accountability other practices of CA were noted. Jones was an example of being a spontaneous, connected leader when describing instances of people approaching him in the isles regarding needs and making suggestions about meeting those needs. Elston talked of the people doing the work being the ones who know how to do it and the need to listen to them. Salmon talked of strengths, coaching and values—those things believed in the strongest. These statements are grounded in belief in the people worked with—a basic assumption that makes it possible for positive practices of CA to occur. Below, I include a specific example that emerged in the course of the research and study on accountability.

A Case of Constructive Accountability at Deere

The following was reported to me by Gina Hinrichs, Ph.D., and Project Leader for Business Process Excellence at Deere and Company at the time it occurred. This story reveals several vital characteristics of CA. It is presented in Hinrichs’ own words.

“Approximately 8 years ago [1996], as a Deere project manager, I attended a professional development course taught by Paul Axtell of Contextual Designs Company. The course name was Foundations and, as its name indicated, it was a foundation for operating

effectively in an organization. One of the key concepts in the three-day course was the concept of "X by Y." X by Y was an understanding or an agreed upon way of operating that was said to move a project forward; the members had to state what they would do (X) to move the project forward and by when (Y). In addition, it acknowledged that we were interdependent so if ever X by Y were at risk for not being delivered on time, the affected parties would be notified at the earliest point so they could respond. They had to leave finger pointing and functional silo behavior behind in order to operate this way.

"I immediately adopted this way of being because it was logical and effective. Fortunately, I could draw on the shared language of the many folks who had been through Foundations. We all understood the concept and agreed to operate that way. It had a very positive impact on projects, accountability, and respect. Unfortunately, X by Y had not spread to all of the Deere units.

"Later when I was on a large project at one of our largest units, I went there with my X by Y approach as a foundation to the way I now operated. At the end of every meeting I asked for the X by Y's. I quickly found out that this language did not exist at the unit. I talked about the concept but found that there was not a group buy in to the concept. I later found out that I was considered aggressive (read pushy) because of using X by Y.

"Years later, many of the individuals in the project attended Foundations and experienced the concept. I sense that it is now a culturally acceptable way of operating. X by Y became an acceptable story. X by Y is no longer a pushy project manager's way of forcing accountability but a shared norm. It took shared language, meaning, and culture to get to accountability that wasn't considered negative but a positive way of working collaboratively towards a goal" (Hinrichs, 2004, personal communication).

Unfortunately, the X by Y was not a living concept across the organization at the time of Hinrich's project. Later the process spread into other parts of the organization. Respect for the process and the leader using it was not the outcome until the language of X by Y was mutually understood and strongly in place.

Although shaped in somewhat linear language and action, X by Y, when part of a process, includes characteristics of constructive accountability:

- Information sharing is important to the process.
- When people come to an understanding, they agree on actions to be taken.
- The process acknowledges interdependent relationships.
- Finger pointing and functional silo behavior are left behind.
- There is a positive impact on projects, accountability and mutual respect.
- The process draws on shared language.

To identify CA as a practicable process suggests it is possible to specify and practice existing and new forms of CA, stories must be shared of its benefits. This allows CA to become real. As stated by Gergen (2000), “As stories are told, forms are recreated. The content belongs to the forms, and the forms control the content” (p. 66). As they are retold, the recursive nature of the stories expands understanding. And yet, some would say that CA is so complex and happens in so many different ways and instances, that it is impossible to note definitively the “practice” of constructive accountability. As alluded to throughout this writing, the complexity of CA *can* be reduced to recognized and learned processes of relationship, collaboration and co-construction. It is possible and imperative to understand “the what” of CA in order to create the potential for recognition and expansion of these practices into “common sense” and common use ways of working together. To do so is to bring to attention that CA emphasizes the process of coconstruction. CA includes the expansion and application of social practices, skills and attitudinal components essential to collaborative and contributive performance within the interlocked behaviors of working. The parties involved should experience positive practices of CA as practical and beneficial relational occurrences.

Impediments to “Moving Toward” Constructive Accountability

Although the purpose of this thesis was to introduce, explore and develop the concept and practices of CA, it became clear from the conversations-interviews that full implementation of CA would not be easily accomplished. The conversations identified for me a list of impediments that deserve attention. This is not an exhaustive list; there are undoubtedly more impediments not listed and possibly more severe cautions not included in this list. Nevertheless, I offer the following:

1. Deep relational connections are essential but can lead to ignoring current or pending issues or crises because of the reluctance to embarrass a leader or co-worker.

Chris Argyris (1990) has written extensively about organizational defenses and the reluctance to embarrass colleagues, potentially deepening or propagating errors. To be silent eliminates the “constructive” aspect and the mutuality of accountability. It is to ignore instead of address issues of concern. The observer has concerns but withholds them—after all, “possibly it will go away and I won’t have to bring this error to the attention of this colleague and others.” Or, maybe I’m wrong. I don’t want to get my colleague in trouble or call attention to her ignorance. Janis (1972) wrote of *groupthink* decades ago, discussing President John F. Kennedy’s decision to take action in Cuba (the Bay of Pigs). Because of deep respect and attraction to the charismatic Kennedy, his cabinet did not address pertinent issues or ask the tough questions regarding the considered action. The group followed the leader too closely, eliminating deep questioning and evaluation of his proposals.

Additionally, within workgroups, “common ground” is often instinctively sought in order to reach agreement. Of course, communication cannot continue without at least some amount of common ground. Communicators, in order to identify common ground, often take the listener’s background knowledge and opinions into account and spontaneously tune their messages to be

congruent with the listener. Called “audience tuning,” such information sharing takes into account what the audience knows, feels, thinks, and believes (Higgin, 1999, p. 34-35). If impeding the sharing of information, this adjustment may not be beneficial. Accountability becomes fragmented.

Purposeful attention to examining alternatives and addressing the risk of audience tuning in a highly cohesive group is essential to the practice of constructive accountability.

2. Work behavior may unjustifiably be determined as deviant behavior.

Stepping out of line can be perceived as counterproductive work behavior (CWB). CWB has been described as behavior that is seen as passive or aggressive. Passive CWB is either working counter to acceptable work practices or purposely (quietly) failing to follow instructions. Aggressive CWB, on the other hand, comprises either intentionally doing work blatantly incorrectly, or overt behaviors, such as bullying, theft or practicing threatening activities (Fox, Spector & Miles (1999). Overt behaviors obviously call for appropriate action. Passive behaviors are either ignored or challenged according to the perceived severity of the problem.

Beneficial disagreement and/or challenging appropriately adjust the issue of whether the behavior is CWB. This “constructive disobedience” may include CA behaviors such as asking tough questions or asking questions that have not been asked before. Yet, it may also appear to be CWB when using a method one sees as a better approach or creating a new process when it was not requested. As noted by Salmon, changing priorities as a result of a sense that current work is no longer a priority can also be seen as a counterproductive. This suggests that although some behaviors are unquestionably counterproductive, CWB behavior is often “in the eye of the beholder.” For one person, an activity can be seen as important. For another, it is a misstep.

When “going outside the lines” of how things are done, a rigid, stability-focused orientation may see these behaviors as threatening and not see the benefits of these CA behaviors.

An example could be a worker making a suggestion to a co-worker who considers the suggestion to be “nosing in.” There is an unwillingness to consider the suggestion; it is “different” so it is rejected as not worth discussion or consideration. The co-worker soon learns to keep suggestions to himself. In some organizations this type of behavior is not seen as an intrusion; it is not seen as counterproductive work behavior. These activities would be seen as the normal activities of co-constructing changes that benefit all involved. What has previously been seen as CWB may, when seen through the understanding of CA, initiate new or additional learning and action.

The invitation to be part of and central to activities of CA will be appealing to some, yet it also requires collaboration, involvement and patience, as well as tactful and responsible responses. For some, these activities might seem counterintuitive. Without proper awareness training, support and encouragement—and accountability that is constructive, negative CWB activities can be the response of choice for resistant participants. When such CWB occurs, constructive accountability calls for coaching and other strength building and awareness enhancement approaches. Unfortunately, for some, the ultimate application of end accountability may be required, potentially insisting on compliance to get the person to experience the benefits of CA. Burns offers the paradoxical statement that

CA should take away the stigma... so there are no punitive results associated with the notion of accountability. But you want to do that without taking away accountability. To use CA to better relationships in situations and projects while retaining “the buck still stops here.”

For the few, it may be necessary to activate the final accountability of separation.

3. Using constructive accountability as the only element in moving toward a relationally healthy and constructively accountable organization can ignore other elements that may be causing social upheaval in an organization.

There is rarely only one issue or one road to healthy workplace relationships and practices.

Leaders must continuously ask themselves sensemaking questions that may highlight issues that impede CA practices, such as the following:

- Is the reward system based on individually focused performance, causing competition and estrangement?
- Is favoritism an issue?
- Are there ethics issues at the top and throughout the organization that are being ignored?
- Are there outmoded processes and procedures that put up barriers to contribution, causing frustration and anger?
- Are decisioning processes located with high level “knowers” who don’t know?
- Is development of organizational members on the bottom of the list?
- Do members feel safe or threatened?
- Are there “old-time” leaders who refuse to change because they have been successful using fear and punishment to motivate performance? Do they feel they are “entitled” to lead this way?
- Is leadership development seen as unneeded and time-consuming?

Organizations are complex because complex people inhabit them. Yet organizational leaders often see one thing as “the issue”—something that is a symptom instead of a core reason(s) for discontent and malfunction. Looking for the “one answer” is not reasonable. Asking the right questions of oneself and others in the right way—a CA activity—opens opportunities to address issues that impede progress. Salmon emphasized the roll of questions when he noted that, “dialogue, which is really inquiry-based, is always seeking clarification and deeper understanding of the image of the world.” Organizational leaders must make sense by asking themselves and others the painful questions.

4. Attempts to initiate CA without the enrollment of key formal and informal leaders would be problematic.

Trudell sees leaders as the architects of organizations. Their influence is vital to membership understanding and enrollment in new ways of working together. Of course, having leaders who feign CA while practicing traditional accountability as their primary tool of leadership stalls/destroys advancement of the process. Organizational members will be watching for verification of commitment to CA and feigned compliance will signal failure. As noted by Elston, "It is like being on probation for a couple years. I've seen people watch for the leader to trip to confirm that they don't really mean it."

Procter and Gamble, it appears, is an example of an organization that has attempted to make changes and address issues from the top without getting the enrollment of managers in their various plants and departments. This would be especially problematic for CA. Elston noted,

A lot of [the issues] were really about poor leadership. Often a new program would be rolled out from the Division in Cincinnati and certain timing and phases had to happen. [The local leaders] would be truly just going through the motions because they really weren't participating in it in the plant... Often leadership would be telling people to do something they didn't believe in themselves. How can you hold other people accountable for that?

Addressing commitment issues within the education and practice of leadership will be an early and primary means for moving toward an active culture of constructive accountability.

5. CA may be seen as adding to everyday work.

There is an assumption that CA will be time consuming. However, I do not agree. If you look at the full picture of avoided discrepancies and malfunction through the use of CA, the issue is invalid. Yet at the same time ignoring the workload of organizational members can be

disastrous. Unfortunately, in most organizations members are typically experiencing an increase in workload. When leaders do not address this issue successfully, the workplace feels merciless, leaving workers dejected, exhausted and caring less about patterns of relationship and connection. One participant said, “CA just means more work. These ideas do not fit into the time left in our workday; nor does it fit into the expectations of organizational leaders.”

In the quest to survive, organizations are relying ever more heavily on the Western mainstay of individualized effort and the heroism of accomplishing the most in the quickest, most effective and efficient way. Too often the effort is to gain the most productivity with the fewest employees. To keep organizations “lean and mean” without considering the impact on the workforce and the work culture is to ignore the resulting lowered productivity, turnover from exhaustion and lost time illness days.

Resentment and distrust ultimately rise to the top when people are feeling taken advantage of and overworked. In this climate, movement toward a new kind of accountability is doomed to failure. No one has time for heightened communication or efforts to support others. When they take time to do so, they are falling behind, not meeting deadlines and not meeting the punishing expectations of oblivious leaders. This crisis forces reliance on old habits of accountability in order to survive.

It is said that organizations must use sound managerial practices to nurture the mind and muscle of their organization. New awareness has arisen regarding where the innovative mind of an organization is located. Hiers and Pehrson (1977) define the organization’s mind as *the collection and collaborative thought processes of the minds of the individuals who think on behalf of the organization* (p. 21, italics in text). Cotter and Cotter, from a social constructionist view, would agree, saying, “We have come to believe that meaning making is a ‘we’

phenomenon, a relational process within a social context. 'Mind' is social" (p. 163). Today members at all levels are recognized as thinking on behalf of the organization. As noted by Salmon, a "reality factor" comes up: Do we have enough resources to do this project or achieve a certain result? To be scrupulously "lean and mean" may lessen collaboration and creative exchange.

6. Understanding that relationships and conversational involvement are beneficial may be difficult for some organizations.

To presume that people are wasting time when casually talking is detrimental to constructively accountable performance. Members must have permission to communicate informally in their work. Finding information, checking possibilities, **pulling others into one's work**, asking questions not asked in the past, challenging status quo and being creative, innovative and supportive all require ongoing, progressive conversations. Remaining with one's head down at one's work limits opportunities for such conversations.

Recently I learned of an organization that is requiring each person to insert a code to use the outside telephone lines of the company. The intent is to "monitor how long and how often people talk and to whom." I would suggest that the stress, fear and need to make excuses for talking to others, to justify exchanges as "only business," is to encourage people to limit how their work gets done. Being treated like children, as noted by Elston, justifies the desire to look for a position where people are valued as thinking members instead of organizational hands.

7. There is generalized ignorance of the psychological costs of individualized accountability.

Participants frequently alluded to, although no one specifically mentioned, the *psychological costs* of individualized, anticipated, negative accountability. Also, the stress and sense of separation experienced in traditional accountability was also not explicitly mentioned.

Organizational members, when feeling the possibility of punitive accountability, hold back. Productivity is jeopardized. “Them” vs “us,” “you” or “me” divisiveness occurs, limiting relationships. The limitation of relational connection both inside and outside of local groups creates pockets of people who blame specific others for issues seen as problematic.

Among these psychological costs is the possibility that people may resort to unethical behavior to avoid being held accountable. Research on goal setting has recently suggested that the construction of “counterfactuals” (that is, imaginary accounts), such as overstating performance by a small or large amount, may occur when failing to meet a goal (Schweitzer, Ordóñez and Douma, 2002, p. 424). This is especially true, I suggest, when people are faced with potential social or economic costs for what may be seen as lack of performance. Shifting accountability to being an ongoing communicative activity inside everyday work has social, application and economic benefits that will lower psychological costs. Enlisting active and responsible involvement of others would also be beneficial to both avoiding unethical “counterfactual” activities and accomplishing higher levels of performance. The psychological costs for all involved, including the organization, could be lowered.

Pertinent here is Trudell’s viewpoint on the failure of organizations and how it relates to accountability.

If you look at it, while a company fails from a business strategy and cultural perspective, what really drove them to this failure? I believe that many companies fail because they go to a somewhat negative accountability system that is destructive and *they don’t see it*. People begin to hide and rationalize performance because they feel alone and cannot achieve. Or incentive structures cause people to go outside of ethical boundaries because they want increased incentives and do unethical things to get them. It is the core of accountability that breaks down ... Accountability is a key player [in failure when] it is not constructive (emphasis indicated).

This would suggest a tie to negative emotions—an issue that could result in increased psychological costs. Emotions were mentioned three times in the conversations. Webster, as noted earlier, suggested there has to be a willingness to bring our emotions to the table as well as the willingness to accept the outcome, the consequences. Meyer talked of the development of skills that relate to “emotional maturity” and interpersonal efficiency rather than technical skills, suggesting that development and training are important to timely use when needed. Dagues suggested

Relationships are improved through... daily exchange but there are times when [relationships are] definitely depleted. There are some that say there is an emotional bank account where you are making deposits and taking withdrawal. That even smacks of old school thinking, that there is an equation and it is a zero sum game.

Emotions typically emerge from interactions with others and substantially determine the outcomes of interactions (Miller and Leary, 1992, p. 202). To overlook the psychological costs of ignoring the emotional context of accountability can be problematic. Unfortunately, when psychological costs are high because of the ramifications of traditional accountability, these costs impede relationships and organizational achievement.

8. Competing commitments impede the movement toward CA.

I believe that Kegan and Laskow Lahey (2001a) were correct when they proposed the reality of *competing commitments* as a significant reason why people “hear sense but continue to practice nonsense.” Competing commitments are defined as “*an active commitment to keep the thing you are afraid of from happening* (Kegan and Laskow Lahey, 2001b, p. 49, italics in text). Their research revealed that unrecognized competing commitments are opposing agendas that make achieving change like “shoveling sand against the tide” (2001a, p. 85). In the case of moving

toward CA, reasonable people appear unreasonable, undermining the organizations efforts toward transformation. Kegan and Lahey state, "Competing commitments cause valued employees to behave in ways that seem inexplicable and irremediable, and this is enormously frustrating to managers" (2001a, p. 86) and others.

When competing commitments exist, leaders may say one thing and do another. There are fears of loss of something valued. An example might be when organizational leaders say, "Our people are our most important asset"—and yet the talents and skills of organizational members are ignored or undervalued. The fear may be of feeling less than skillful themselves. Or: "We practice an open door policy for our employees and our customers"—and yet people are not treated respectfully when they raise concerns. The fear may be that they will hear something that they do not want to hear. Or, a leader claims to want involvement of subordinates—but treats them like children when they attempt to become involved. Meyer offered another example of competing commitments in her reference to those at the top not being held accountable for bad performance suggesting that redundancies [layoffs, restructuring] almost always impact those at lower levels in the hierarchy (i.e., lower than business unit management team level). She added, "The management team is hardly ever held accountable for the consistent lack of good management practice that leads to the situation in the first place." The fear may be of loss of control or credibility. As noted by Elston, when executives are compelled to do something they do not believe in "by the Division," they are not committed. There is the possibility, even a probability, of a competing commitment.

Holding competing commitments can jeopardize the willingness to collaborate—even when feigning encouragement of involvement. Recent research has replaced the need for achievement with "the need for power." It is suggested that high-level managers "strive hard to

reach positions where they can exercise authority [power] over large numbers of people” (*Harvard Business Review*, 2002, p. 136). Stohl and Cheney (2001) say, “Sharing control among workers and managers is an essential aspect of participatory processes” (p. 111). For those practicing command and control leadership, a strong “need for power” may cause them to be reluctant to engage in behaviors that support others in exercising their own. They might micromanage or not delegate to others. Or, there may be an attempt to hoard information in order to remain knowing. Asking leaders to be inclusive, open, collaborative and consultative may be, for some, asking too much. The competing commitment of a need-for-power may cause CA to appear unreasonable. Those with competing commitments can threaten the sustainability of an organization’s movement toward change. Peers and others must be alert to these occurrences and address it through constructive accountability.

These impediments to CA also suggest that moving toward CA requires the introduction of a “metaconversation,” a “larger,” overarching conversation that creates a collective identity of what accountability is. These conversations create and support an understanding of the new approach to accountability. Without this metaconversation, an organization will slide back into traditional accountability even though the concept of accountability that is constructive is preferred and has been “trained” as the organizational language and process of accountability.

Creating a Movement Toward Constructive Accountability

Given this array of impediments to developing an organizational culture in which constructive accountability is fully embraced, what steps can be taken to move in this direction? How can broad movement toward CA be accomplished? Nadler, Shaw, Walton (1994) suggest there are two types of organizational change: incremental and discontinuous. *Incremental change* is noted as fine-tuning; the need for *change has been anticipated* and is located in seeking improvement.

Incremental fine-tuning and adjustment is permanent but the organization, for the most part, stays the same. It is tinkering with the current system, the internal environment (p. 25). In incremental change, adaptation is called for and occurs when external conditions in the environment require some response (p. 26). Something has changed that requires new equipment, technology, a new product or way of thinking.

Discontinuous change is often a reactive change. It is quick. It is without alternatives. In some cases, it is a response to an environmental shift that requires quick change in order to survive. Nadler et al (1994), although promoting discontinuous change as advantageous, state, "Discontinuous change is more traumatic, painful and demanding on the organization." And, "It is often a radical departure from the past" requiring the organization to respond immediately (p. 23).

Incremental change is problematic for Nadler, et al (1994), because "a piecemeal approach gets bogged down in politics, individual resistance, and organizational inertia" (p. 26). And yet discontinuous change can be wrenching, causing feelings of loss and disconnection. There is no time to prepare the membership. It is, "Today we are dramatically different." As noted, it can be disruptive, punitive and relentless.

To attempt to change an organization into a constructively accountable organization with people practicing CA "overnight," to announce, "This is the way it is going to be," can bring confusion and disorientation. To become a culture of accountability that is constructive requires both an "overarching" significance (as suggested in discontinuous change), and a focus on local significance (an incremental change). It is an ongoing, overarching *movement toward change* and a reconceptualization, as noted above by Boje, et al, (2004), of the way people accomplish

together. Small and large issues must be addressed continuously in order for the metaconversation to change.

In CA, change that is relationally brought forward calls for introduction organization-wide. It must have the determined focus of those-who-matter in changing the larger issues related to CA. Policies and procedures, leadership styles and rewards are examined and changed. There is no turning back. New behaviors, practices and old assumptions are addressed with a sense of urgency through training and action. *All* training, whether technical or behavioral, includes re-visiting elements of CA. Work is to be accomplished in a new way.

Incremental change includes *a movement toward change* that constitutes a series of actions directed to some purpose: *a series of progressive and interdependent steps that allow an organization to become different* in the way things happen. It is ongoing; it is never over. As noted by Max DePree (1997), "Movements tend to create a wonderful breadth of mind in the people involved, whether the group focuses on human relations or engineering or financial affairs" (p. 27). It continues on toward an ever-emerging goal that is known and yet allows for the unknown (Seiling, 2001, p. 227).

Unfortunately, a move toward constructive accountability is a difficult thing to ask of leaders and organizational members who, presumably, have worked successfully using traditional accountability as the impetus for performance. Thus, it is useful here to return to the participants in this study. How did they see the possibilities for transformation? In fact, there was hesitation on the part of some of the participants when I asked the question, "Tell me how you think constructive accountability could become part of the way people work in the workplace. Describe what might be needed in the way of new ways of leading or training and

development of organizational members.” The following includes participant answers to the question. Many of the participants said in one-way or another: *Start with the leaders.*

- **Lee Salmon:** “It is the leaders role to start the language and to completely reframe the performance appraisal process for it to be appreciative; they also have to build in more and more ways of recognizing people when they are doing right and moving toward. It is not to say that we may not have to deal with the negative, but hopefully we can turn it around and use an appreciative process.”
- **Mike Burns:** “Talk about it at the top. Talk about what are the stigmas of accountability; talk about your definition of what CA might be. And you ask, how do we do this? Your point is that it has to be continuous, how do you make it happen? Heighten their awareness, have them reinforce each other. And when there is misstep, Oh, here is an opportunity.”
- **Paul Stavros:** “I think you have to have the managers buy into it from a philosophical standpoint. And then it will permeate every level of the organization. It has to because it doesn’t do any good for the manager alone to be accountable. For me the first step is to develop shared language... you know, what are you talking about? What does this mean? Shared stories.”
- **Diana Sadighi:** “The critical piece is the leader...what is the personal style of the person leading the group? If you follow a participatory and collaborative model, you are going to have a different perception of accountability than in the old style management model.” Also from Sadighi, “It probably depends on the organization and how they embrace it. Some combination of leading by example.”
- **Steve Webster:** “I can see this to be a topic among other topics about how you provide leadership. When you get into the decision making side of leading and managing, this could become a fundamental part of that in terms of a module or whatever under decision making.”
- **Todd Steele:** “The environment has to be created and, obviously, if it doesn’t exist now, it has to be top down to see it as a good thing to be constructive and talk to people about anything... as long as it is working in a positive direction.”

- **Cynthia Trudell:** “If people talk about [accountability] openly and understand that there is another way to approach it, perhaps they would be willing to listen. It starts with seeing how powerful is the concept and how can we apply it best for our own success. When an organization thinks about that and talks about it openly and will consider what it takes to run their organization in ways that they have never thought about before, it creates all kinds of opportunities.”

Yet not all those interviewed emphasized a “top down” approach. Three emphasized that you have to “enroll those in the middle.”

- **Tom Dagues:** “You have to, I think, enroll those in the middle. It has to be a micro organization, within a certain area, I’m going to go ahead and let them do it. I’m not going to get in the way.”
- **Christopher Jones:** “I think that, if you were introducing something like [CA], you have to start at the supervisor level and you have to get them to buy into it.”
- **Mario Marais:** “We need to talk about all the hidden assumptions about accountability. We need to discuss interdependency and how it plays out in the workplace, organisationally. Rotating line people into management positions for short periods and vice-versa could develop increased understanding of the different contexts and how the different thinking about accountability develops.”

The leader-focused comments suggest that the introduction of a new form of accountability could gain energy when it starts at the top. The mid-level-focused comments suggest the need to enroll leaders at multiple levels in the process of bringing into recognition a new understanding of how accountability looks when it is constructive. According to Schein (Coutu, 2002), commitment and change at the top can facilitate change, but if you study cases of major change in organizations, “learning often begins in a small group and only gradually spreads across the organization and then up” (p. 105). Green (2004) suggests that managers, from a rhetorical perspective, “play an active role in the diffusion process, because what managers say and how

they say it matters a great deal” and “can... shape the social structure through which these practices diffuse” (p. 654).

Shein’s statement above underlines comments in the conversations about “have organization members willing to sit down and talk about it;” “it has to drive a lot of conversations;” and that it must be a “bi-directional thing.” And, according to Green’s rhetorical perspective, broad diffusion is critical. Thus, a movement toward CA would be best served to purposely and determinedly engage members throughout/across the organization. Broadly speaking, we might say that the continued evolution of a movement will depend on an ever-expanding domain of collaborative talk.

Recently an interview in the *Harvard Business Review* with Nestle CEO, Peter Brabeck, offered his thoughts on “evolutionary change” (Wetlaufer, 2002, pp. 113-119). Brabeck suggests, “Big, dramatic change is fine for a crisis... But not every company in the world is in crisis all the time.” He added, “You know, all this talk about reinvention in business reminds me of 1968, when a whole generation thought you couldn’t have social change without a revolution” (p. 114). Brabeck believes that collaboration is the key to continuous improvement, his form of evolutionary change—and, “People who are unwilling to accept that collaboration is necessary for continuous improvement are a different matter. You have to be relentless about getting them out of the organization” (p. 119). He also notes that collaboration stymies people in the middle levels the most.

Getting the message about collaboration across at the top is relatively easy. And it’s easy, too, with the blue-collar workers... But where you have the layer of concrete heads is in the middle management. They feel that we are taking away their hierarchy, that they are losing power. Many of them are not willing to collaborate, and some of them don’t know how (p. 119).

In light of these commentaries, how might we view an ideal process of moving toward the implementation of CA in an organization?

The Movement Toward Constructive Accountability

As noted, a movement is a series of progressive and interdependent steps that lead to a new pattern of action. A movement is ongoing; it is never complete. It continues on toward an ever-emerging goal that is “known” and yet allows for the unknown. What might a movement or evolutionary change from traditional accountability to constructive accountability look like? A movement toward constructive accountability might include the following:

Step One: Someone becomes uncomfortable with the way accountability is currently occurring.*

“Movements” often start with one person choosing to go down a different path. This person can be the organizational leader or someone located “south” of that leader. This person is experiencing or observing limitations that he or she feels must be changed. This person cannot shake the sense of discomfort and misalignment with the traditional form of accountability. This person sees the pain of traditional accountability and sees the impact it has on the attitudes and productivity of good people and the organization.

Step Two: Feelings of discomfort regarding traditional accountability create a need to engage others in discussion. Others join in the discussion.

There is now a sense of urgency and a clear commitment to address issues of deficiency and limitation that impairs how things are done. The need for change has, for this person, become a conviction. It is suddenly intolerable to remain controlled by the intolerable (Seiling, 2001, p. 226). He or she openly seeks alternatives to traditional accountability in one-on-one discussions with others. There must be a better way. These people talk about it with others, bringing them

* My thoughts on movements are influenced by the writings of Max DePree (1997) and Parker J. Palmer (1992).

into their thinking and together they explore the possibility of moving accountability into everyday work.

Step Three: Collective conversations lead the group to translate their beliefs into feasible practices that can be taken to those (or others) in leadership roles.

New language is designed around this thinking. This language is given meaning and integrated into the “talk” of how their work could better be accomplished. Formal leaders, if they are not the initiators, are approached and enrolled as well as others who are recognized as informal leaders. Stories are told about what “it” is and what it can mean to the organization. At this point enrollment of diverse, energetic and influential members across the organization is vital to moving forward. These change agents begin to trickle in. The conversations continue with the encouragement of sensemakers and meaningmakers. If ultimately recognized as significant, these conversations will be moved to a larger venue. The initiators of the movement are enlivened by the possibilities that lie ahead.

Step Four: Decisions are made as to policies on moving toward a culture of constructive accountability.

The movement is beginning to move ahead. Activities are designed to bring others throughout the organization into the movement. Now there is an even stronger sense of urgency. Determination now exists on the part of leadership. Open action is taken that outlines new expectations of performance and behavior; they are verbalized from the top. Policies, procedures and rewards are re-designed around application. The decision-making process is conceptualized as a collaborative sensemaking activity. There are clear goals for integrating CA into performance and behavior. The awareness of CA as a positive, beneficial concept of performance occurs through education across the organization. In the meantime, there is a call for collaborative applications of the process. Leaders apply and emphasize constructive

practices of accountability and acknowledge successes. These activities are designed into the system. The original thinker(s) are rewarded by the support and affirmations of others and CA is starting to permeate the organizational context.

Step Five: Sustaining the movement toward CA is an ongoing, ever-expanding process of learning, application and education regarding the strengths essential to the new workplace culture.

Participants are becoming bolder and more energized by their involvement and contributions to their organization. The traditional form of accountability moves into the background because people are rewarded for practicing constructive accountability in their daily work.

As CA becomes part of the organizational culture, performance of CA becomes part of the habits of how people work together. The members themselves deepen the culture of CA as real and realistic. Yet in order for it to become part of the metaconversation of the organization, there must be an ongoing overarching conversation affirming CA as important to organizational success. Learning opportunities include recognition/affirmation of CA as part of how things work, reinforcing past learnings and building toward future educational offerings.

The effective hiring of new members who will willingly become part of the CA culture is significant to continuing the movement toward CA. CA becomes part of orientation. Current organizational members advocate CA to these new members and coach them in the process. People who have difficulty making the change are coached and encouraged to change. In rare cases where change is problematic, they are asked to leave. To ignore the continuation of traditional accountability practices is to approve the behaviors as appropriate.

The process must continue as leaders emphasize what works and acknowledge successes. Unfortunately, challenging and changing traditional beliefs of accountability will encounter the determination of some members of the group to keep things the same—even if it hurts. At least

the current way is known; changing belief systems is likely to be uncomfortable. It is moving into the unknown. By calling existing concepts into question and causing positions to shift, other assumptions will also need to shift, calling for new understandings and the courage to live and promote CA. Determination is essential to move toward CA. It is important to bring on board strong, informal leaders who can influence others to someday look back and say, “Things have changed; there is a difference.” These people are important to sustaining the process.

In the words of Margaret Meade, “Never doubt the power of small groups of committed people to change the world. Indeed, nothing else ever has.” These ideas are illustrated in the following example.

Moving Toward Change at Hunter Douglas

In his conversation, Todd Steele at Hunter Douglas WFD offered an example of a related movement that occurred in the company many years ago. It still influences how work is accomplished. The movement is now part of the underlying understanding of how to work at HD-WFD. An Appreciative Inquiry was carried out because management saw a need to re-think how work was being accomplished. They wanted to bring back the kind of innovation that had been present when the company was smaller. Steele said,

You have to design [the process] from inside, turning it into something that fits your organization and is designed to work in your organization, something you can live with. Something that works, or it just dies a quick death. *It takes training and education.* As we filtered down into the organization every employee was talked to about it, it was a large investment of time away from the job and knowing that everyone isn’t going to embrace it. You get fanatical about it. (Emphasis added.)

The movement started small and then grew, reflecting Steps One and Two of a Movement Toward CA. A few worked to justify the process and to keep it moving forward. Step Three, above, is also reflected in Steele's words,

We had to start small with only a few people. We had to ask the question, "Why should I do this?" It is natural to protect yourself and not stretch yourself. We asked why would we want to do this? We started with five [people] and expanded it to the influencers, not necessarily the managers; [we went to] the ones others looked to. We ended up with about fifteen and went through the process of deciding how it has to work.

In taking such a movement into the organization, there has to be patience and the determination to stay with it. Designing new policies and procedures and applying the learning processes in Step Four are essential parts of the process. Some people will not buy into it while others are willingly going to take it on as something they have been waiting for. Steele added,

To the majority of the population it doesn't look like a lot to them sometimes. They are going to take it or leave it. You have to just keep reinforcing it. It has to drive a lot of people's conversations, structure bonuses and merit increases around what you want to happen, to drive some of the behaviors you want to happen. [He repeated,] You have to keep in mind that influencers are not necessarily managers. Most people would say I have to have my managers involved in it.

Step Five includes sustaining the movement while knowing that it is an ongoing, ever-expanding process of co-construction. There has to be a commitment to establishing the skills and strengths essential to expand the underlying understanding, application in practice and social patterning components of the concept. Steele said,

Yes, the senior managers were the first go-around, but when it went "below," it didn't go by title. It went to, hey, this guy influences people. Or, hey, that guy wouldn't add value to the process. It could be anybody. You have to look at who the people are that people

in the organization look to, who are “cultural icons.” Those people who represent what they want to emulate.

It matters as to who is representing the concept to others. Influencers continue to influence when they are living the process. They work in ways that say more than words about their belief in the benefits of the movement and what it means to themselves, the group and the organization.

When movements are significant they become part of organizational culture. As noted by Steele, the results may no longer be visible in everyday work. It is “just there” as part of the way to work together. Regarding the HD-WFD movement, Steele said, “That was in 1998. I don’t look at it as being AI anymore but there is a strong component of it in our organization today.” Practices are integrated into the thinking and continued growth of the company.

A Vision of Possibilities

Conversations on accountability were held in diverse organizations in the USA and South Africa. Early in the conversations, understandings of accountability varied in context, but for the most part, followed Scott and Lyman’s (1968) rendition of accountability, clearly placing accountability as an evaluative process *after* something has gone wrong. The dissertation was initiated based on my belief that a more effective, relational form of accountability could change the thinking of organizational members regarding how work is accomplished. The elements of collaboration, sensemaking and cooperation would be key elements of this new form that moves accountability forward into the work. According to the conversations, it will not be easy. According to Trudell, “If people can’t think about something differently, there are limitations about what you can do with it.”

Sustaining constructive accountability will require multiple strategies, projects and training, as well as an everyday focus on the process. An emphasis, understanding and

coordination of CA processes are key to transforming the conceptualization of accountability. It must be moved from an after-the-fact, rational focus on weakness, to an ongoing, strength-based, mutually activated relational process during the work.

Constructive accountability calls for the recognition that work is co-constructed. As such, mutual engagement is essential, making the integrative nature of CA possible. Within CA, members have permission to actively bring others into their work. There is an appearance of the collective person being individually responsible. Activities of offering, exchanging and expanding the resources are seen and experienced as processes that lead to the design of best decisions and accomplishment.

The understanding, application in practice and social patterning components of constructive accountability broadens and builds the strengths of the organization. When a “bad” decision is made, it is understood that many have contributed to the process, diminishing the find-and-punish accountability activities of the past. Recognizing and educating what constructive accountability “is” establishes the “we-ness” of accountability—even when one is acting “alone.”

The form of accountability described, whether occurring in the workplace or in personal life, as suggested by Sadighi, is based in valuing others. As noted by Streatfield (2001), “Organizations are what they are because of the people in them. It was human persons, the people who constituted the organization, who evolved collectively and individually” (p. 76). It is also people who orchestrate meaningful transformation through valuing relationships. Positive relationships encourage people to, as noted by Gergen (1999), “create our realities together” into “comprehensible worlds” that over time develop “special kinds of relationships in which change, growth, and new understanding are fostered” (p. 148).

To summarize, a movement toward constructive accountability would ideally result in the following:

- *Accountability would be an interdependent activity within everyday work that has positive consequences for the welfare of the person and the group as a whole.*

Constructive accountability, when activated through interlocked relationships, recognizes that the interdependence and engagement of relationships expands opportunities for the effectiveness of people and their organization. Every exchange and action has consequences for the collective person, the group and organization.

- *Accountability, when constructive, would include the language of co-creation and collaboration, creating a metaconversation of what accountability “is.”*

Moving the understanding of accountability to a language of acceptance and collaboration broadens and builds the strengths of organizational members and the organization itself. Thus the organizational language and, ultimately, the organization’s metaconversation about accountability will change. As the language changes, collaborative habits and connections will be seen as essential. The interlocking connections of relationship, as related to performance, will be enhanced. The metaconversation (culture) is created through open conversation of what accountability is, how it is accomplished, what it achieves and where it is located in the organization. This reduces the confusion of what accountability is and how it works in the organization.

- *Sense would be co-designed.*

No one makes sense alone. The collective person has been influenced by others and through experiences with others, affecting the reflective and projective thought patterns of the person and the group. When one offers and exchanges an account, whether casually or formally, the others become part of the process; they become mutually accountable for the sense that results. Steele offered an example of exchanging information at Hunter Douglas. Jones talked of “stand up meetings.” What is seen as sensible action becomes part of the common language and understanding of what occurs

in the organization. Attention to the thoughts of others adjusts underlying understandings, thus adjusting what accountability means. CA activities become operationalized, part of the social reality of the group. Attitudes and skills are co-designed around this new relational form of accountability. Thus, when the individual acts on his or her own, he or she is unconsciously observed as being a collective person acting as part of the collective group.

- *End accountability would not be eliminated.*

When a person is demonstrating a perpetual set of difficulties with the process and is not responsive to participating within the group—or to the resulting coaching, there will be repercussions. The group has been listening to the needs, beliefs and actions of this person as there may be learning opportunities within the experience of the person. Yet it is recognized that there are consequences if the person does not move toward positive change. End accountability, when applied selectively and appropriately, can be constructive. It is certainly called for under circumstances of negative behavior and dysfunctional activity. It is recognized that there are times when the most constructive place for a person is outside of the organization.

There are many pathways to designing what constructive accountability can be—and, for some, confusion may remain as to what it is. This confusion does not hamper the co-design of a metaconversation of acceptance and relational collaboration. As noted by Gergen and Gergen (2004, p. 19), note that there is no “Truth for all,” but instead “truth within community.” Thus, regarding CA, while the metaconversation is ever changing, activities of CA expand through the acceptance of the community of the co-constructed realness (small ‘t’, truth) of accountability as constructive, affecting the culture and character of the organization.

Directions for Future Research

I have offered a conception of an ongoing process of accountability that is constructive and socially constructed. In addition, I have tried to make more visible the less than constructive

elements and outcomes of the current application of traditional accountability. I am not in any way claiming that there is a clear and logical progression from individual to constructive accountability. I am, however, suggesting that accountability can be reflected in a metaconversation that leads to more open, inclusive relationships that enhances sensemaking practices. I am also suggesting the attempt to move toward accountability that is constructive must be made in order to create more open, flexible and productive organizations. In saying this, I suggest, as does Todd Steele, that the process itself must be coconstructed. Thus, I encourage and anticipate future research that elaborates on this framework.

Investigation (and justification) of how to move CA into the culture of organizations is called for. As a social construction, CA will certainly be difficult for some people and some organizations to absorb. This suggests that the activation of constructive accountability may be more possible in some organizations than in others. Future research must determine whether and when CA is most valuable for organizational adaptation. It was suggested in the conversations that CA, as a recognized component of organizational leadership development, would positively influence the conversations, circumstances, sensemaking and outcomes of the leaders and the organization. Research into the best applications in leadership training is suggested.

I would also like to see the positive approach of Appreciative Inquiry used as a way to gain conceptual thinking and investigation around the relevance of constructive accountability to schools. Accountability has been an ever-present theme in talking about schools in the last decade. And the subject is daunting for administrators and teachers. I am wondering what the process would look like and what benefits might be evident to the community.

CA recognizes the need for shared realities and ethics, as called for by Gergen (1996). Even though ethics is a topic of conversation in today's media and workplaces—and our courts,

only two brought up ethics. I had expected it to be more openly discussed, but it only appeared in passing in the conversations with Webster and Trudell. Webster talked of Sauder's commitment to the surrounding community and Trudell talked of organizational values and people knowing their "moral and ethical boundaries."

There is also a paucity of connection between accountability and ethics in writings about both subjects. In a recent *Academy of Management Executive* Special Topic Edition on ethics (January 2004), of the twelve articles, only two briefly referred to accountability. Martini (2004) offered the question, "So what has happened to the roadmap of accountability on the landscape of corporate America?" (p. 55). The second said, "We would hold executives accountable for including this ethics bottom line in their personal performance commitments as well as in those of their organizations" (Thomas, Schermerhorn and Dienbart, 2004, p. 64). Several times it was mentioned that executives should "model" the importance of ethics, but it was only mentioned this one time that they should be held accountable to do so.

I see ethics as in peril when the traditional form of accountability is the relevant way of finding and punishing the one person at fault. When organizational participants feel threatened with negative repercussions, ethical standards are at risk. Moving from individual to constructive accountability is essential in order to increase ethical practice in organizations.

One of the early books that indirectly promoted my thinking on accountability as constructive was *The Art of Judgment: A Study of Policy Making*, by Sir Geoffrey Vickers (1965/1995). Two statements that caught my attention were: "Reality judgments and value judgments are inseparable constituents of appreciation," (p. 54) and "Accountability is a section of the field of interaction and dialogue by which reciprocal relations are regulated" (p. 169).

Since what is appreciated is co-constructed with others, the designation of “reality” and “valuable” is flexible and generative and related to what is seen and experienced as constructive. Vickers argued that appreciation is an inherent and essential part of human activity from the level of individual consciousness to that of human cultures (p. xviii).

Attention to appreciation has gained prominence in today’s managerial writings. There is increased understanding of appreciation in academic and practitioner language; it is spreading throughout the writing and practice of scholars, writers and practitioners. An example of the awareness of appreciation occurred in the conversation with Salmon. Unfortunately, such awareness hasn’t, it seems, reached into the thinking of the ordinary leader working everyday in the workplace. Appreciation was mentioned by Todd Steele of Hunter Douglas (where Appreciative Inquiry was utilized several years ago). He mentioned it in passing when he was struggling to “find appreciation” in any past experience of accountability and in his conversation on how AI was utilized at Hunter Douglas-WFD. A research question that comes to mind is: What role does appreciation have in the application of constructive accountability?

Erich Fromm once wrote, “If hope, faith, and fortitude are concomitants of life, how is it that so many lose hope, faith, and fortitude and love their servitude and dependence?” (1968, p. 19). My hope is that a movement toward constructive accountability can return some of that “hope, faith and fortitude” to our everyday efforts together in the workplace. Constructive accountability is a re-design of what accountability could be in collaborative, relationally aware, strength-based organizations. An attempt has been made to alter the traditional theoretical foundations of accountability and organizing that markedly still remain committed to a find-and-punish model. It is a direct attempt to replace the traditional, command and control structure of

accountability practiced at all levels in today's organizations with a collective orientation to building a more positive future.

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Appendix A

A Family of Criteria for Social Constructionist Practices*

Centrality of Language	[Vocabulary of emotions.]
Is the practice sensitive to the centrality of language in creating the sense of the real and the good? Is the practice also sensitive to the limitations of language alone in creating realities?	
• Multiple Realities	["I" come out of many realities.]
Does the practice recognize the potential for multiple constructions (vocabularies, rhetoric) of the real and the good?	
• Multiple Selves	["I" am many pieces.]
Does the practice recognize the potential for multiple constructions of the self, or for multiple voices of the person?	
Language as Performative	[Based on traditions.]
Is the practice sensitive to the uses of language within relationships, how differing accounts draw people together, force them apart, generate hierarchies, suppress, coordinate, etc?	
Socially Constructed Realities	[Our way of putting things]
Does the practice take into account or promote reflection on the historical and cultural (or local) constitution of what counts as real and good?	
Language as Future Building	[Openness to new conversations]
Does the practice enable language to be employed in generating more promising futures?	
Realities and Ethics as Functional/Dysfunctional	[There must be some agreements.]
Does the practice recognize the need for shared realities and ethics, but as well the limitations of consensus in relationships?	
Sharing of Constructionism	[Heightening awareness]
Does the practice share with others its own premises and its limitations?	

*Pass out for presentation by Kenneth J. Gergen, Conference, 1996, The Taos Institute, in Taos, New Mexico.

Appendix B: Comments on Traditional and Constructive Accountability

Table 1: Comments on Traditional Accountability

Table 2: Comments on Constructive Accountability

Table 1: Interviewee Comments on Traditional Accountability

Confusion as to what accountability is	As an act of control	Individualized accountability	A corrective tool	Current methods are working or are CA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •They will eventually get around to telling you they don't believe in it. •I have to think about it. •Relating it to performance review process. •Accountability meant making sure you had yourself covered. •People wrestle with the issue of accountability. •Accountability is important. The reality is it is seldom done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The whole process is about control. •We assume non-accountability in subtle ways, e.g., by the processes we set up. •A negative frame. <p>Something to be avoided, something painful, for both involved.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A hierarchical relationship. •The relationship is defined by titles. There is little interaction. •People need to understand the boundaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The whole process is about control. •We assume non-accountability in subtle ways, e.g., by the processes we set up. •A negative frame. •Something to be avoided, something painful, for both involved. •A hierarchical relationship. •Relationships are defined by titles. There is little interaction. •People need to understand the boundaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •There needs to be strong, definitive expectations of performance. •It's purpose is preparatory to discipline. •It is based on trying to place blame and how something has gone wrong. •People are watching and they decide if I've done something right or wrong. •A continuous mind-set of reviewing what people are doing within objectives. •One assumes there is punishment, degradation coming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I think it already happens in many organizations. •This is pretty normal here—at least it sounds like what we do. We just haven't put a word to it. •We are already applying it here through our performance plan and review. •Management by walking around is the same thing. It is informally interacting. •It feels to me like it is how my department is run.

Table 2: Interviewee Comments on Constructive Accountability

As a relational activity.	An exchange process in day-to-day work	As collaboration	CA is beneficial	Suggestions for Initiating CA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •It boils down to having a trusting relationship with those you work with. •Interaction is so important. •It would increase the focus on relationships across groups in any process of getting work done. •They do not understand the relational side. •It is working off each other's skills and strengths. •It is bi-directional. •Develop a team approach – we are in this together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •This exchange process taps into a belief that we want to do our best and use our talents in the best possible way. •You will possibly save a lot of angst when you move accountability into every day practice. •Your point is that it has to be continuous talk about how you make things happen. •It makes it sound as though accountability is part of every interpersonal encounter. •In terms of interaction, it will deepen the quality of exchanges between people and provide a platform for continually learning from each other. •I am accountable for being a part of that and so are all the other team members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What you are talking about is collaboration. •Doing it within the conversation is the constructive part of it. •We are accountable together, helping each other succeed. •It is in the here and now, the problem solving issues, when CA is really a collaborative thing. •People collectively take charge of what their mission is and they are not afraid to step out because they are collectively dealing with things. •They have to learn to believe that we need each other to get things done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •They would have better harmony in the groups and they'd get their stuff done better. •It will help them feel good about politicking. •Could be a lot of positive that would come out of it. •It sounds like a cultural issue. •It will assist building trust, ownership and commitment. •This philosophy will transcend down through all the individuals at even the lower levels. •It would have a good chance of improving attitudes and perceptions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •I think it is a leadership program because it embodies leadership, what it is, the whole thing. •Take it in through leadership training. •You have to start with the supervisors. •You have to enroll those in the middle. •I has to start with the leaders. •The environment has to be created and it has to be top down to see it as a good thing. •It has to continually be reinforced by the leaders. •It is a pretty lofty goal.

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